

# **Benjamin and Hegel. A Constellation in Metaphysics**

**Walter Benjamin-Lectures at  
the Càtedra Walter Benjamin**

**Jan Urbich**

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Girona,2014

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Publicacions de la Càtedra Walter Benjamin  
Constel·lacions, 1

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© publication: Documenta Universitaria

ISBN: 978-84-9984-288-2

Legal Deposit: GI 1120-2015

# Preliminary Remark

The following lectures have started what will hopefully be a longstanding series of Walter Benjamin-Lectures at the University of Girona (Universitat de Girona), Spain. They were originally given in June 2014 under the auspices of the Walter Benjamin Chair (Càtedra Walter Benjamin, Memòria i Exili), which was founded in 2013, not far from Port Bou, as the world's first academic Chair

to provide a space for academic and cultural research around the figure of Walter Benjamin and the historical conditions of the dictatorships, the exiles and the wars under which he lived and worked. The Walter Benjamin Chair at Girona University wants to visualize the presence of this world-wide recognized figure in the Gironian territory: by an academic projection towards the exterior, and by transferring the knowledge of his work to our society.[1](#)

The content of the lectures has been revised and extended for publication. For the most part, the verbal form of the lectures has been maintained in the written text in order not only to document the course of the lectures, but also to enable easier access to this difficult subject. In my opinion, the “genre” of published lectures still serves an important purpose in the field of humanities: by establishing a link between a wider audience and the special branches of science, between introductory considerations and the discussion of special problems of research. Moreover, the genre of lectures enables scholars to develop certain basic ideas without the permanent ballast of a comprehensive and heavily-footnoted discussion of research. In addition, in terms of language, it allows a freer oral dialogue, one which is nevertheless precise in picking up on the “regulative idea” of vivid philosophy which Plato introduced to occidental thinking: as the “living and breathing word of him who knows, of which the written word may justly be called the image.”[2](#)

The following lectures represent a first attempt to discuss the philosophical productivity of a constellation between Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and Walter Benjamin (1892-1940): as an approach to Benjamin which was denied, almost forbidden by Benjamin research (in some respects, with good reason) for a long time. Furthermore and beyond the limited question of the relation between these two thinkers, I want to explore how meaningful the mutual illumination of idealist and (in a narrow sense) modernist figures of metaphysical thoughts can be, and — concerning the understanding of philosophical modernity— in which direction the interweaving of certain metaphysical arguments from two of the most important, yet presumably unrelated intellectual key figures since the 18th century leads us. In line with the understanding of the genre “lectures” I have given above, references to research will be highly selective and in no way representative or even exhaustive, in order not to overload the argumentation,[3](#) but to concentrate on just a few key arguments. These lectures are therefore meant to open up initial access to this constellation, to embark on a first and cautious exploration of its possibilities, and to promote the idea of its usefulness and meaningfulness for current philosophy by stressing some very basic arguments. It is not their aim to explore completely and fully the possible context and content of this constellation.

I would like to thank with all my heart the Director of the Walter Benjamin Chair, Professor Dr. Jörg Rudolf Zimmer, Girona, for his overwhelming generosity and kindness in inviting me to give these lectures, and for all the enriching and exciting philosophical discussions we had on various subject matters again and again. The university of Girona can feel very blessed to have such an original philosopher in its own ranks, with such a remarkable way of thinking and writing, a philosopher who upholds the vital tradition of occidental metaphysics even if current times do not bless this tradition with good fortune. I would also like to thank Dr. Adrian Wilding of the University of Jena, for his really helpful, well-informed and thorough proofreading, from which this text has benefitted so much.



# First Lecture

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Walter Benjamin:  
On their Mutual Isolation in Contemporary Theory

I feel very honoured to speak at the “Càtedra Walter Benjamin”, a unique institution that represents not only an opportunity to think about and discuss the philosophical work of Walter Benjamin, but which also stands for the intellectual duty to uphold a certain kind of traditional and at the same time critical metaphysical philosophy: because in an age in which, to use the words of Theodor W. Adorno, the recent past sometimes appears as “Ur-history” (primal history), as continually “destroyed by catastrophes”,<sup>4</sup> metaphysics itself may gain a new kind of urgency and responsibility for developing alternative views of “being itself”, without becoming a mere servant of any solidified affirmative ideological system that reigns in philosophy, politics or economics. For this reason I agree with the late Adorno who said in an interview: “I believe that philosophical theory is capable of creating practical effects in society much more by its own objectivity than by submitting to the rules and aims of praxis.”<sup>5</sup> In the three Lectures at the “Càtedra Walter Benjamin”, I would therefore like to develop a new approach to the theoretical, indeed epistemological thought of Walter Benjamin, an approach that may also —as a “side effect”— bring out evidence for the necessity and possibility of metaphysics today: by showing how a “classical” metaphysics such as Hegel’s interacts productively with Benjamin’s unusual, modern version of metaphysics. We will therefore deal with Benjamin’s fundamental categories of metaphysics, i.e. with the structures of ultimate justification and categorical representation that he develops primarily in his early works, up to the book on the German Trauerspiel. In fact, Benjamin participates intensively in the powerful occidental tradition of metaphysical speculative thinking about the last and most objective concepts of “being itself” — even if he focussed much more on the historical dimension of fundamental metaphysical concepts than did, for example, Plato or Kant. But to focus, as the existing research does, on Benjamin merely as a philosopher of history, without discussing his dedication to the concept of eternal and fundamental ideas, would also implicitly ruin the idea of critique that seems essential to so-called “Critical Theory”. In fact, Critical Theory does not work without this metaphysical foundation. In order to criticise the current state of something, e.g. the existing social order, you need to have norms which do not entirely belong to, or arise from, the “damaged” present age you are criticising. Technically spoken, critical norms should not be self-referential (in contrast to self-relational) in order to work properly: i.e. they should not entirely fall under the content which they represent.<sup>6</sup> Critique of one’s own historical age presupposes norms which, at least in part, transcend the contemporary world in order to contrast its damaged condition with an idea of something other, something better, something which is not fully marked by the conditions it needs to overcome. The justification and the content of these norms need to be at least partially free from the conditions and effects of the contemporary world, without lapsing into the idea that these norms could be “timeless” or eternal. Their claim to validity rationally transcends the borders of their own historical origin by means of their critical functions and semantic possibilities. If all of one’s ideas and norms are mere products and expression of the ideologies, beliefs and ideas of one’s own age, then an emphatic critique —that means a critique which encompasses the entire society and age— and which realises a free and rational subject, even if within the boundaries and restrictive forces of contemporary society, would be impossible. You have to reach partially beyond your era (without believing that you can entirely escape its determining conditions and limitations) in order to gain a critical perspective upon it: half child of your time, half child of every time.<sup>7</sup> Because of this demand, thinkers like Benjamin have often mourned the impossibility of critique in the modern age, due to the disappearance of the correct intellectual distance, and therefore the possibility of critical standpoints in a society that tends to engulf all essential differences and contrasts, making them disappear within a great web of undesired participation and guilt. In Benjamin’s *One-Way Street* (1928), it says: “Fools lament the decay of criticism. For its day is long past. Criticism is a matter of correct distancing. It was at home in a world where perspectives and prospects counted and where it was still possible to take a standpoint.”<sup>8</sup> In Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* (1951), the same argument is elaborated further:

He who stands aloof runs the risk of believing himself better than others and misusing his critique of society as an ideology for his private interest. [...] The detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant; the only advantage of the former is insight into his entanglement, and the infinitesimal freedom that lies in knowledge as such. His own distance from business at large is a luxury which only that business confers. This is why the very movement of withdrawal bears features of what it negates.<sup>9</sup>

Incidentally, the most famous phrase from Adorno's whole philosophy arises out of these considerations about the possibility or impossibility of a social critique, and his reflections about its validity and scope: "[T]he antithesis, no sooner uttered, is an ideology for those wishing with a bad conscience to keep what they have. Wrong life cannot be lived rightly."<sup>10</sup>

In this first lecture, I will try to set up the field of my argument and explain the historical requirements that are necessary to understand my approach to Benjamin's metaphysics. First, I want briefly to explicate the question posed in these lectures and note its necessary limitations. Secondly, I want to give you a sketch of the special complex of problems which is evoked by this field of argument and its historical grounds. Thirdly, I want to illustrate the current state of research on my topic, and why from the vantage point of the existing research the questions which I take to be fundamental do not even exist.

Ernst Bloch, when planning to edit a volume entitled *The Complete System of Philosophy* (*Gesamtsystem der Philosophie*) in the 1920s, intended to give the section on the "Theory of Categories" to Walter Benjamin, whom he had met in 1918.<sup>11</sup> In so doing, both continue a tradition that has been the cornerstone of occidental theoretical philosophy since the ancient Greeks. Since its Platonic and Aristotelian origins, metaphysics in general has been the (necessarily non-empirical) theory of reality in its entirety and the theory of reality's basic, most fundamental conceptual principles.<sup>12</sup> Thus it has dealt with four central questions. In broad terms these are:

1. What is that-which-has-being (*das Seiende*) as that-which-has-being (*Seiendes*)? In other words, what fundamental characteristics belong to beingness itself (*Seiendheit*) before something becomes or is considered a specific kind of being such as objects, persons, conditions, facts, etc?
2. Are there any levels of being itself, that means is there a highest or lowest, a more/most or less real being? In modern metaphysical thinking, this question is rephrased as follows: Which kind of being must be understood as actual, primary, maybe even in a strong or narrow sense as the only really existing kind or form of reality, to which all other kinds of being can be fully traced back or fully reduced in description? I.e. is there a kind of being in whose categories of description all other kinds of being can be completely transformed?
3. Is there an *arché* or a set of principles, i.e. what are the most fundamental and ultimate concepts, principles, patterns of fundamental description and grounds of being and beingness?
4. What is the most evident, most fundamental, distinct and certain kind of knowledge about being or kinds of being? How is this knowledge objectively possible and justified?



The question of “categories” belongs to the third question about the most fundamental concepts and grounds of being and beingness. According to Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*, categories are “schemes or patterns of utterances” or “figures of predication”:<sup>13</sup> the most general, most basic, most abstract, most simple and most essential forms of beingness and of language about beingness, such as space, time, relation, quality, quantity etc. Categories are always presupposed in every utterance because one can only form meaningful sentences and refer meaningfully to objects if a certain set of categories is already in use. Here linguistical and ontological patterns depend on each other: “In any discussion (λογος) of entities, we have previously addressed ourselves to Being; this addressing is κατηγορεισθαι.”<sup>14</sup> It is one of the most powerful ideas of occidental philosophy that its main task consists in uncovering and justifying the systematic pattern of categories with which we always operate, which pre-empt every access to being, and to which we must constantly resort in order to be part of the world at all. The most common kind of categorical analysis always regarded categories as eternal parameters of being, and as such immune to any historical change. For philosophers such as Plato in his later works (*Sophistes*), categories (beingness, difference, movement, stasis, identity) are objective entities outside the origin and grasp of human subjects, so-called ideas, which frame the architecture of being itself.<sup>15</sup> For others, such as Immanuel Kant, categories belong primarily to the transcendental features of the subject itself, not to objective being-in-itself. According to Kant, categories are employed spontaneously by the subject to conceptually shape empirical reality in the form of “pure” schematic patterns of synthesis in propositions.<sup>16</sup> But despite their differences over the ontologically subjective or objective status of categories, both Plato and Kant would agree with the assertion that categories need to be supratemporal in order to provide the kind of fundamentality and universality which they claim.

Walter Benjamin, who always saw himself as a philosopher in the great occidental tradition of metaphysics following Plato and Kant in particular,<sup>17</sup> did not agree with this assumption about the timelessness of categorical structures and its platonic separation from the empirical world. At the same time, he always insisted on the necessity of objective fundamental ideas which provide the ontological norms of being itself, and which cannot be described by empirical means or the naturalistic methods of science. Benjamin, especially in his works up to the *Trauerspiel* book, emphasized against the neo-Kantianism of the late 19th century and against Husserl’s phenomenology, that categorical concepts include a “temporal core” rather than having their truth “as something invariable to the movement of history”,<sup>18</sup> as Adorno put it. But this does not mean that the categories, which Benjamin —platonically— calls “ideas”, are merely subject to historical change, i.e. a pure effect of preceding historical forces, so that every age could have an almost completely new set of fundamental structures of being and knowledge. The most essential ways of world-perceiving cannot simply be dependent on the “Zeitgeist” and the ideologies of the current state of society and being. Because it is through them and thereby through metaphysics, that we are able fundamentally to gain a critical distance and perspective on the discourses of our age. Metaphysical categories, therefore, are not purely formal and empty forms of conceptuality like in Kant, but semantically rich productive patterns of finite determined meaning in themselves, even before empirical meaning arises from them in their application; Benjamin shares this idea of categoriality with Hegel.<sup>19</sup> Later on, Michel Foucault in his ground-breaking work *Order of Things* (1966) radically historicises the elementary forms of our knowledge with his idea of epistemological ages which organise the order of empirical knowledge in completely different, almost arbitrary ways.<sup>20</sup> Instead of this, Benjamin develops a highly complex theory in which categorical forms and historical phenomena are mutually dependent and mutually inclusive: the interrelationship of categorical ideas conditions the determined historical phenomena and is at the same time conditioned by them. Essential to the justification and explanation of this theory are the concepts of “origin” (Ursprung) and “monad” (Monade) as developed in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, the main source of Benjamin’s metaphysics, since it represents his most systematic attempt to outline his metaphysical theory. An idea, which captures the essence and most universal of phenomena,<sup>21</sup> “has history, in the sense of content, but not in the sense of a set of occurrences which have befallen it. Its history is inward in character and is not to be understood as something boundless, but as something related to essential being, and it can therefore be described as the past and subsequent history of this being.” (OR, 47; GS I.1, 227) Therefore, ideas are given in the form of an “origin” (Ursprung):



Origin, although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis [Entstehung]. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which something emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration und re-establishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete. (OR, 45; GS I.1, 226)

For Benjamin, the “*causa formalis*” of ideas needs to be described by a term from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz:

The idea is a monad. The being that enters into it, with its past and subsequent history, brings — concealed in its own form— an indistinct abbreviation of the rest of the world of ideas, just as, according to Leibniz’s *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686), every single monad contains, in an indistinct way, all the others. The idea is a monad —the pre-stabilized representation of phenomena resides within it, as in their objective interpretation. (OR, 47; GS I.1, 228)

As this quotations show, ideas do not arise from history as do normal historical phenomena, according to the logic of “becoming and disappearance”. They emerge from the becoming and disappearance of history, that is, they “temporally exceed temporality”.<sup>22</sup> Their historicity changes the concept of history itself. Benjamin develops a paradoxical double-relation of ideas: just as ideas stand outside of the process of historical determination, they simultaneously inhabit the essence of historical change. Benjamin achieves this by transferring historicity from the outside (that is, from its function as cause and ground of ideas), to the inside (that is, to the essential inner form and content of ideas). The way in which ideas represent the universal and essential characteristics of being must be seen as radically historical: because they put the empirical elements of the determinate being in such a “constellation” that their historical disparities become meaningful for their eternal shape. The essential and somehow eternal conceptual core of a determinate being can be grasped without ignoring the fact that it is only given within the temporary realm of history. Furthermore, the essential elements of its idea are only historically given and must be assembled as idea in a way that preserves and emphasizes the historical index.<sup>23</sup> Following Benjamin, this can only be achieved if the conceptual or logical infrastructure of the idea is conceived as “*Darstellung*”: an important German philosophical term that is very hard to translate and which is not to be confused with “representation”. It will be discussed in more detail in the third lecture.

All the arguments we have just mentioned, together with the aim of reconciling universality and temporality within metaphysical ideas, link Walter Benjamin to a philosopher who is usually considered as far removed from Benjamin as possible: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). In these lectures, I will argue that Benjamin's thinking maintains deep and essential hidden affinities with the philosophy of Hegel, affinities which allow us to gain a better understanding of Benjamin's seemingly obscure metaphysical theory. Thus the core of my argument is to demonstrate how the metaphysical speculations of both thinkers coincide in surprising ways and to show what we can learn from this about Benjamin's thinking. In performing such a difficult and in a sense remote task, we will have to make certain restrictions and clarifications on what we try to accomplish, in order to secure our results against certain obvious objections by the academic community. First of all, I am not trying to make Walter Benjamin into a Hegelian or claim that he actually derives all of his theory from a Hegelian framework. The many contradictions and divides between early Critical Theory and German Idealism can't be ignored, because they are too strong and important for understanding many of the genuine and original impulses in Walter Benjamin's work. Benjamin's way of thinking and his self-understanding as a philosopher distances itself likewise from Neo-Kantian philosophy of the late 19th century, German Idealism and its successors as well as from newer movements such as Phenomenology or Fundamental Ontology (Heidegger)—although certain of his ideas can be compared with each of these or even traced back to them. In recent decades, these connections with important contemporary and past intellectual frameworks of Benjamin's thinking have come more and more to light. Luckily, Benjamin wasn't the radical "solitaire" he often claimed to be, even if his ideas and arguments, because of his sometimes hermetic way of writing, often appear to be isolated, unique and unprecedented.<sup>24</sup> Thus we will concentrate on the relation between his logical, categorical concepts as developed in the Epistemo-Critical Prologue, and Hegel's project of a metaphysical logic. That means we isolate similar ontological and epistemological basic structures in Benjamin's early thinking, concentrating on the main metaphysical principles he develops, before comparing them with some of Hegel's most basic and essential assumptions and presuppositions. Thus all the differences, contradictions and incompatibilities between Benjamin and Hegel and their diverse historical backgrounds and intentions will be ignored so as to gain a fresh outlook on the way Benjamin develops some of his most fundamental philosophical principles. In so doing we will become aware of some objective correspondences between both philosophers in the way each constructs their theory, something that tells us much about certain problem-solving strategies in philosophy, strategies which coincide even in seemingly remote thinkers.

This question and approach, by the way, is inspired by Benjamin's own way of dealing with the history of philosophy. The way in which Benjamin often relates seemingly incompatible thinkers and their ideas with each other and with his own, often contradictory thinking —the way he selectively assimilated or approached Plato, Leibniz, Kant, Carl Schmitt, Husserl, Heidegger (to name just a few)— can be a model for our attempt to relate Benjamin's doctrine of categories to the thinker he seemingly despised: Hegel. The problem which emerges from this approach concerns more the kind of justification that such an inquiry requires. If we have to assume, for some good biographical reasons, that on an intentional level Benjamin refused Hegel's thinking for a certain time, and if we have to assume furthermore, that he didn't even know Hegel's philosophy particularly well in the beginning (which we know from the facts), then how justified and meaningful could our results be? In my opinion, there are above all two answers to this methodological challenge. First, the latent presence of some Hegelian motifs in Benjamin's work can be explained by the methodological insight that real historical interferences can be highly indirect, unconscious, unintentional and transsubjective.<sup>25</sup> The explanation for elements of Hegelian thought in Benjamin's metaphysics can draw upon the fact that Hegelianism had an enormous influence upon 19th Century German philosophy, and on the fact that hidden concepts, figures of thought and patterns of argumentation from Hegel expanded into all fields of philosophical thinking, even into schools of thought opposed to Hegelianism. This shows how the coherence and contiguity of a certain tradition determines the effect of its concepts and meanings partly behind the backs of subjects, and without them knowing exactly where all the elements that hover around them in contemporary thinking and the dominant discourse actually come from. What we know, how we know and why we know something, how this knowledge is transferred and even what grounds we believe to have found for this knowledge, do not entirely remain in our control and are not fully transparent to us. In this way, psychoanalytic-like presuppositions about the unconscious ground of our thinking have always been part of rational concepts of the genesis of knowledge since Plato. Hans-Georg Gadamer has expressed this point about the epistemological limitations of consciousness about our knowledge and self-reflection in radical terms:

In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.<sup>26</sup>

Hence, to explain Benjamin's partial affinity and closeness to Hegel in terms of influence-relations, means to accept the reasonable assumption that much of our knowledge is not based on our intentions and not open to self-conscious access. That is also why criticism of ideology (Ideologiekritik), as introduced by Marx and continued by Benjamin, Roland Barthes or Theodor W. Adorno, will always remain a necessary function of conscious social responsibility. Because there will always be, based on our limited and at the same time historical essence as humans, a huge dark area within ourselves, a field unknown to ourselves and with huge influence on our knowledge and behaviour that can easily be occupied by manipulative forces.



Second, we can actually explain the closeness of Benjamin to Hegel in certain aspects of their metaphysics without reference to causal influences, no matter how direct or indirect, intentional or unconscious. Interestingly, the most suitable theory for this kind of explanation in contemporary German philosophy was developed via a history of German Idealism, but based on a fundamental methodological idea drawn from Walter Benjamin: that is, the methodology by which we can explain the relation between Benjamin and Hegel already embodies Benjamin's method. This methodology is called "constellation studies" (Konstellationsforschung), and was developed by Dieter Henrich.<sup>27</sup> Constellation studies does not explore actual influences and effects but rather objective systems of resemblances and differences. Connections are considered as parts of a complex web of thoughts within the questions, problems, tendencies and terms of a certain time or age, rather than as isolated effects of real contacts between philosophers. Meaningful relations between theories appear as feedback mechanisms within a resonance chamber that is the real subject of the connections discussed. Constellation studies emphasizes that different authors and even different schools of thought within a certain age have the same "motivational resource".<sup>28</sup> I.e. thinkers are often working on essentially the same problems and on elaborating the same terms and ideas, called "the background situation"; even and especially when they are intentionally opposed and belong to different philosophical paradigms and schools. Benjamin shares with Hegel an interest in questions of ultimate justification, categorical philosophy and the exploration of the term "idea" within the range of the occidental paradigm of Platonism.<sup>29</sup> Both then can be understood as philosophers who try to justify a certain kind of metaphysics and its explanatory claims under the conditions of an anti-metaphysical or at least metaphysics-critical modern age. Even if both of them develop these questions in different directions and with different premises, they coincide in certain important fundamental results, also because their particular understanding of the problem arises out of a highly similar critique of Kant.

So, at least the approach by which we can compare Benjamin's and Hegel's metaphysics can be justified. Next we have to understand why this comparison is not only justified but meaningful and helpful for grasping what Benjamin is doing in his epistemological and ontological reflections. That does not imply any mystification or worship of Hegel. Neither is Hegel considered as the greatest character in western philosophy, someone with such gravity that every meaningful philosophy falls back towards him even as it tries to free itself from his thinking. Nor is Hegel seen as the sublime and timeless norm of every possible philosophy, such that you have to come close to his thinking if you are to achieve something great in philosophy. In his inaugural lecture *The Order of Discourse* (1970), Michel Foucault stated:

But to make a real escape from Hegel presupposes an exact appreciation of what it costs to detach ourselves from him. It presupposes a knowledge of how close Hegel has come to us, perhaps insidiously. It presupposes a knowledge of what is still Hegelian in that which allows us to think against Hegel; and an ability to gauge how much our resources against him are perhaps still a ruse which he is using against us, and at the end of which he is waiting for us, immobile and elsewhere.<sup>30</sup>

Foucault's remark implies the idea of a self-mastery regarding the intellectual forces that are still at work in our thinking, and the demand for a permanent enlightenment concerning the problems and questions that we are still facing and which are not entirely our own. Despite how Hegel is appreciated, this is part of the necessary reflexivity and spiritual discipline that the humanities offer and demand from every participant.



In order to do this, we have to start with the superficial diagnosis that has determined the Benjamin-scholarship up to now: the unrelatedness or oppositional relation of Benjamin to Hegel. Before getting to the more substantial reasons that are given for this, it is useful to quote some remarks from letters and articles which clearly show Benjamin's personal contempt for Hegel and his discomfort with what he sees as the idealist rage for totality and systematicity. While he is still studying in Bern, Benjamin writes in a letter to his friend Ernst Schoen dated December 28, 1917: "Hegel seems to be awful!" (CR, 109; BR I, 166). One year later, Benjamin reports ironically to Gershom Scholem on a seminar paper he has given dealing with parts of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

Here I am harvesting seminar laurels (*laurea communis minor*) with papers on Bergson and on a paragraph of Hegelian phenomenology [...]. The Hegel I have read [...] has so far totally repelled me. If we were to get into his work for just a short time, I think we would soon arrive at the spiritual physiognomy that peers out of it: that of an intellectual brute, a mystic of brute force, the worst sort there is: but a mystic, nonetheless. (CR, 112f.; BR I, 170)

Similar to Adorno's later characterization of Friedrich Schiller in *Minima Moralia*,<sup>31</sup> Hegel here appears as origin and incarnation of bourgeois thinking: an extensive expression of the brute force of abstract rationality that expresses itself historically in different kinds of social, economic, psychological and intellectual repression. But Benjamin's first encounter with Hegel dates back to his involvement in the reform movement of Gustav Wyneken prior to 1912, when Benjamin was still in school and got excited about liberal-democratic ideas of reforming the life of students —a program which, in Benjamin's own words, "is built upon Hegelian philosophy". In the same letter, Benjamin states that his intellectual development during this five year period of time was very much dependent on "the name Hegel, as a program, not as a dogma!".<sup>32</sup> Later on, in his studies in Freiburg and Berlin, when Benjamin came under the influence of the strong philosophical movement of Neo-Kantianism and, for whatever reasons, shared his teacher's contempt for Hegel (Hegel was of course something of a red rag to the Neo-Kantians),<sup>33</sup> this influence made it even harder for him to gain a neutral, unemotional relation to Hegel. Externally, his academic Neo-Kantian socialization inculcated in Benjamin a refusal of Hegel's philosophy before he had even started to learn in a more systematic way about Hegel through his own reading. Internally, Benjamin's attempt to overcome his juvenile enthusiasm for a certain kind of socio-political reform movement, an attempt that ended unhappily in conflict with Gustav Wyneken, encouraged him to break with Hegel as the symbol of his former ideas. How affective and autobiographical this refusal of Hegel really was, and how little grounded in an actual reading, becomes obvious in the intellectual development which followed, namely Benjamin's work on his dissertation on German Romanticism: because already the way in which Benjamin turn away from Kant and criticise him, comes very close to the critique of Kant delivered by Hegel. After the mid-1920's there are no more harsh verdicts by Benjamin on Hegel. Instead of a general refusal, Benjamin now seeks partial connections to Hegel, or at least combines the questionable aspects he sees in Hegel with affirmative judgments. Already while writing the *Trauerspiel* book, for example, Benjamin writes to Gershom Scholem (19. Februar 1925) about how important Hegel's theory of tragedy could be to his thinking:

To be sure, I have lost all sense of proportion in the course of working on this project. It now also has a new theory of tragedy; in large part, it derives from [Christian] Rang. It cites Rosenzweig extensively, much to [Gottfried] Salomon's displeasure, who maintains that everything that Rosenzweig has to say about tragedy has already been said by Hegel. And this may even be possible. I have not been able to go through the entire *Aesthetics*. (CR, 261; BR I, 373)

At the time as Benjamin is working on the *Trauerspiel* book, i.e. 1924/ 1925, he also starts to read Georg Lukács's *History and Class consciousness* (1923) for the first time. And as for many intellectuals in the 1920's, this book becomes the major influence on him and the most important source from which he derives his knowledge of and attitude towards Marxism. The whole Western tradition of Marxism, i.e. the theoretical affiliation with Marx outside the (later) Eastern-bloc-states and their Marxist-Leninist state ideology, goes back to the way in which Lukács develops concepts like alienation or reification as primary conditions of modern life in capitalistic societies.<sup>34</sup> It is astonishing to see that Benjamin's involvement with Lukács starts with the expectation of finding in him an opponent, because of the Hegelian roots of Lukács' Marxism: "By the way, I want to study Lukács's book as soon as possible and I would be surprised if the foundations of my nihilism were not to manifest themselves against communism in an antagonistic confrontation with the concepts and assertions of Hegelian dialectics." (CR, 248; BR I, 355; 16. September 1924, to Gershom Scholem) But soon after his reading, Benjamin has already taken over certain central ideas and notions from the indeed strong Hegelianism of Lukács's Marxism. These can easily be recognized in the way Lukács emphasizes and develops the epistemological foundations of Marxist theory with the help of Hegelian instruments without erasing the materialistic critique of Hegel. From Lukács, Benjamin derives crucial impulses towards the key epistemological and ontological foundations of his philosophy as expressed in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*: but all of these impulses in Lukács are rooted in Hegel's idea of truth and being. The idea of the temporality of truth, the idea of the normative difference between truth and knowledge or correctness (*Wahrheit und Erkenntnis/Richtigkeit*), the dialectics of subject and object, the idea of a general need for mediation and the critique of all apparent immediacy or intellectual intuition (*intellektuelle Anschauung*), the idea of a complex and unrestrained concept of experience, and the idea of a universal reason that expresses itself in philosophy: all these elements and even more Benjamin learns from Lukács, who in turn admittedly gains them from his reading of Hegel. In his book, Lukács states: "what the real intention of this work is: to make the question of dialectical method —as a vivid and current topic — the subject-matter of a new discussion."<sup>35</sup> Benjamin's *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* can be seen as an attempt to provide his own version of this intellectual goal.

Another important clue to the elective affinity between Benjamin and Hegel is given by Ernst Bloch who, in his *Marxist Propaedeutics*, just after a description of Benjamin's micrological method, states: "The micrological and the systematical ability often support each other; this can be learned best by reading Hegel's *Phenomenology*."<sup>36</sup> In a letter from January, 20th 1930, Benjamin then utters a desire to develop an epistemology for the upcoming *Arcades Project* (*Passagen-Werk*) which would be analogous to the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, and which names Hegel as its main source:

I now see that I will at least need to study some aspects of Hegel and some parts of Marx's *Capital* to get anywhere and to provide a solid scaffolding for my work. It now seems a certainty that, for this book as well as for the *Trauerspiel* book, an introduction that discusses epistemology is necessary —especially for this book, a discussion of the theory of historical knowledge. (CR, 359; BR II, 506)

The anthology *German Men and Women*, published by Benjamin in 1936, which consists of a series of historical letters, contains a letter by David Friedrich Strauß which describes the death of Hegel. By including this in his anthology, Benjamin acknowledges the major historical significance that Hegel has given to a whole era of thinking. And finally, Theodor W. Adorno notes in a letter from 1934 to Benjamin in response to the latter's work on Kafka: "you are probably not aware of that, but it is really astonishing what dense relations (*dichte Beziehungen*) this work maintains with Hegel."



It is very surprising, therefore, that Benjamin-research has almost completely ignored these clues and has maintained, starting from the early harsh rejections of Hegel by Benjamin, that Hegel must be seen as his greatest and most important opponent. I won't list all the many examples of this doxa I have found in Benjamin studies.<sup>38</sup> The following quote by Fred Rush gives a good idea of what I am talking about:

Benjamin was all but untouched by Hegel, whose cast of mind he found “repellent”. Remaining outside the agenda that Hegel set, Benjamin could develop a highly original alternative account of the structure of art and knowledge, that could be used as an antidote to classical, totalizing Hegelian and Marxist ways of thinking about these matters. Of course Benjamin did not conjure his account out of thin air. It has historical antecedents in the Romanticism of the so-called Jena circle that drew its philosophical sustenance from the very thinker whose views Hegel displaced: Kant.<sup>39</sup>

Rush's statement unfortunately mixes appropriate remarks on aspects that Benjamin indeed refuses in Hegel with inappropriate inferences about the general relationship of Benjamin's thinking to Hegel. Moreover, it sets up a contradiction between Benjamin's reading of Early Romanticism (esp. Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel) and Hegel that disregards the intricate relation of German romantic philosophy to idealistic thinking.<sup>40</sup> But most unfortunately, it grounds Romanticism in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, which is at least one-sided; it thereby presents Kant as Benjamin's major source and model. At the beginning of the next lecture, I will comment on Benjamin's relation to Kant in more detail. At this point, I would like to remind you of a quote from Benjamin in a letter to Ernst Schoen (May 1918): “The greatest adversary of these [i.e. his own] thoughts is always Kant.” (CR, 125; BR I, 187) The existing Benjamin-research overlooks such quotes, always making the same error in reasoning. The most obvious aspects of the opposition between Benjamin and Hegel, which of course have to be taken into account, are irrationally generalized, so that in the end Benjamin and Hegel share nothing more than their mere differences. Bearing in mind that the more philosophical and systematic aspects of Benjamin's thinking, i.e. his ontological and epistemological considerations, have been relegated by German Benjamin-research, and that these very aspects include strong objective links to Hegel's thinking, it doesn't come as a surprise to see this kind of reception. In recent years there have been only a few exceptions to this rule: e.g. Michel Palmier's comprehensive study of Walter Benjamin's ideas and influences, and Eli Friedlander's concise philosophical portrait, both of which dare to reconstruct more thoroughly than before the underlying philosophical implications and correlations within and beyond Benjamin's work.<sup>41</sup> One should also mention that in Germany, the Benjamin-research is conducted primarily within literary studies rather than in philosophy departments. And it is characterised by a more or less latent cult of genius which considers Benjamin's work as literary rather than philosophical and as something singular or unique, incapable of being integrated in philosophical traditions or confined within the limits of systematic thinking.

That said, there are (at least) three important, obvious and general respects in which Benjamin is opposed to Hegel. These are as follows:

1. Benjamin's way of presenting his thought is unsystematic and seems not to be geared towards strict conceptuality, but is instead often fragmentary, determined by a strong literary style in imagery and diction, bound to a concreteness that always seeks to grasp a phenomenon also in its material, real occurrences (but not in a naturalistic sense!) rather than merely by logical description. Further, Benjamin's way of thinking and writing is executed, as we have already seen, in the form of "constellations", not in strictly deductive argumentation. Concepts, images, observations, ideas, pieces of cultural history, narrations and other forms of representation are arranged like stars in a constellation: i.e. these pieces of reasoning and imagination are to open up the phenomenon poly-perspectively, from different angles, ways of access, forms of representation, without restricting them to a single term or concept of the thing but only by enlighten the phenomenon through the multiple, often incompatible techniques of intellectual exploration. In German, the term "Denkbild" (think-image) has been coined to describe this unusual kind of imaginative and yet intellectual exploration of phenomena.[42](#) For Hegel, by contrast, true thinking and philosophy have to stand back from every form of imagination, literary style or inconclusive way of representing and instead orient themselves strictly towards the "labour of the Notion":[43](#) "In philosophy, there is no such thing as looking at something".[44](#)
2. Associated with this, Benjamin often looks for his subjects within their common, ordinary, concrete "lifeworld",[45](#) i.e. within the use and the practices of a certain time, in order to understand what they reveal about the general spirit and the structures of an age. According to Gershom Scholem, Benjamin was a "pure metaphysician" with a highly unusual field of activity: Different from Hegel, whose philosophical thinking focused entirely on the "classical" and rather sublime subjects of occidental metaphysics, Benjamin found himself attracted by the most common daily subjects which seem to have nothing to do with metaphysics.[46](#) His method is thus described by Scholem as "profane theology":[47](#) a term that recalls Benjamin's idea of surrealism as a technique of "profane illumination" (profane Erleuchtung).[48](#) By the use of verbal densification, Benjamin extends and deepens even the most common, insignificant, transitory subjects into a highly general, philosophical, sometimes even divine, sublime meaning. One can see this paradigmatically in the way he analyses the arcades in Paris as a phenomena which unconsciously allow an understanding of how the whole modern age and its capitalistic formation emerged and spread. Connected with this is Benjamin's historical-anthropological materialism,[49](#) which distinctly sets him apart from Hegel's idealism: "It seems to me as if for you, the body of man is the measure of concretion",[50](#) Adorno writes in 1936 to Benjamin. Since the middle of the 1920's, Benjamin had devoted himself to a spiritual kind of materialism which describes all phenomena starting from their material figure (Gestalt),[51](#) i.e. from the way in which each expresses semantic layers in its interaction within the material world and through its actual concrete form. Of course, his thinking never stops at the material utterances and instances of being. On the contrary, it transcends these by interpreting the meanings of material figures not so much via mediation of (but rather stark contrasts between) being and meaning, the material und the intellectual, the individual being and the whole structure of time, society, being and truth. Benjamin is a true master in building multiple and semantically rich (as well as surprising) connections between phenomena, times, aspects, interpretations and structures. But the way in which Benjamin immerses himself in the deep layers of meaning that are embedded into actual beings like a fly in amber, are always reflexively related to the concrete schemas and occurrences of being that are realised in real figures and forms. Furthermore, the actual truth about something must be garnered in the waste of history: in the destroyed, material traces and remains, in the extremes that do not meet the balanced needs and functions of society. For example, what narration in the modern age means to Benjamin, what it means to distinguish narrative literature from philosophy, how experience in general works within the conditions of the modern lifeworld, must be discussed not in an abstract, deductive or inductive way, but rather by describing and analyzing the figure of the storyteller: its symbolic and real body, the actual instances of its task and techniques, the concrete solutions in different narratives and novels by Balzac, Leskov, Dostoyevsky etc.[52](#) Benjamin's historical-dialectical materialism is no mere Weltanschauung, i.e. his dogmatic background theory as the set of unquestionable terms and conditions for ultimate justification. Rather it infiltrates his own way of interpreting, representing and extrapolating the subjects he treats, even where he transcends the materialistic concentration on the given matter, turning the shape and function of something into metaphysical philosophy or theology. More and more the historical-dialectical materialism becomes the principle of the formation of thought by which he accesses reality, without being a dogma that limits the way he grasps social and historical phenomena. Of course for Hegel, the idea of the "concrete" is also very important.[53](#) But it is not understood within a dialectical materialism, such as the one Benjamin develops, and it names something far more non-empirical than in Benjamin's deep contemplation on common daily artefacts and their hidden infinite space of meaning.



3. The way in which Benjamin describes his philosophy of history —a central subject of his later thinking— seems to be completely opposed to Hegel, morally and metaphysically. To state this opposition starkly: Hegel is seen as the idealistic philosopher of the absolute systematic coherence of nature und history, who in his Lectures on the Philosophy of Right gives us an apologia for the idea of “private property” as the cornerstone of a free society,<sup>54</sup> and who in his Lectures on the Philosophy of History gives an apologia for historical progress as the organized unfolding of reason in reality.<sup>55</sup> “Whatever is, is good”: These famous words from Alexander Pope’s Essay on Man could be used to describe the idea of historical reason which recurs in Hegel’s Lectures on the Philosophy of History. On the other hand, Benjamin is seen as the materialistic-Marxist critic of the civil society that Hegel philosophically justified, as well as the critic of the capitalist system of modern liberal societies and its side-effects of alienation and reification, side-effects which for Hegel are already overcome by the Prussian state. Benjamin’s philosophy of history views the bourgeois coherence of social and civilising progress in history more as an expression of the ideology and brute force of the victor in class struggle,<sup>56</sup> a coherence which has to be shattered by revolutionary violence in order for us to gain the possibility of a true messianic salvation of history’s victims: “There is a tradition that is catastrophe”.<sup>57</sup> Hegel as philosopher of the absolute reconciliation of nature, human beings and history within the realm of reason, of the affirmation of being as it is and of historical progress as becoming of the “spirit”; Benjamin as philosopher of the unreconciled extremes, of discontinuity in history, of a history from below that is “catastrophe” and the absolute historical and social critique of modernity: This seems to be the strongest opposition between the two thinkers. It seems, therefore, we have reached a point from which no connection between Benjamin and Hegel can be made, that there exists no tertium quid. In the next lecture, we will see how a connection can be made without falsifying either thinker. A first clue to this is to be found in a quotation by Benjamin which indicates how dialectical he considers his philosophy to be and how important a relation to history is for that philosophy (as it was for Hegel): “Being a dialectician means having the wind of history in one’s sails. The sails are the concepts. It is not enough, however, to have sails at one’s disposal. What is decisive is knowing the art of setting them.” (AP, 473 [N9,8]/ GS V.1, 592)

# Second Lecture

## The Foundations of Benjamin's Hegelian Logic of History, Truth and Representation

At the end of the first Lecture, we seemed to have reached an impasse. In certain important respects, it turned out that Benjamin's philosophy seems to be in complete opposition to Hegel's. In this lecture, we will begin to understand in what ways Benjamin's metaphysics exhibits important relations with Hegel's ideas of being, essence, knowledge and truth. First, we will examine internal as well as an external clues for developing a productive relation between Benjamin and Hegel, thus allowing us to focus on further possible conceptual and historical congruencies without any more bad conscience. Secondly, we will briefly explore the common starting point of Benjamin's and Hegel's metaphysics, namely Benjamin's critique of Kant, which is, in its outline, very similar to Hegel's.

Benjamin himself gives us a hint in the Epistemo-Critical Prologue as to the hidden presence of Hegel. At one point in this text, when he is thinking about the objectivity of the great ideas of the history of philosophy and listing the "exoteric" sources of the Prologue, he adds Hegel as kind of an "esoteric" reference point: "Nevertheless these systems, such as Plato's theory of ideas, Leibniz's Monadology, or Hegel's dialectic, still remain valid attempts at a description of the world." (OR, 32; GS I.1, 212) This enumeration of valid philosophical systems is a necessary as well as sufficient procedure for the Prologue. Plato and Leibniz are explicitly discussed as the main philosophical points of reference.<sup>58</sup> Naming Hegel in addition to these two can therefore be understood at least as permission for us to decipher this text in relation to his philosophy. The Prologue will thus prove the validity of these three philosophical theories in different ways and via different layers of textual representation, both exoteric (regarding Plato and Leibniz) and esoteric (regarding Hegel). At the very least, the text of the Prologue can reasonably be read in this way, even if it is not its explicit intention.<sup>59</sup>

In the following introduction, I will not explicate all the different partial congruencies that could be noted between Benjamin's and Hegel's aesthetics, philosophy of history or social philosophy, in order to prove to you how meaningful it is to connect them. Instead, I will comment on just one historico-philosophical foundation of the Prologue which is already indicated in the just-mentioned quotation about the systems of Plato, Leibniz and Hegel. At another point in the Prologue, we find the following statement:

And so, in the course of its history, which has so often been an object of scorn, philosophy is —and rightly so— a struggle for the representation of a limited number of words which always remain the same —a struggle for the representation of ideas. In philosophy, therefore, it is a dubious undertaking to introduce new terminologies which are not strictly confined to the conceptual field, but are directed towards the ultimate objects of consideration. Such terminologies —abortive denominative processes in which intention plays a greater part than language— lack that objectivity with which history has endowed the principal formulations of philosophical reflections (OR, 37; GS I.1, 217).

Philosophy, as Benjamin understands it, is engaged with a small set of essentially similar ideas or concepts, and its struggles are not attempts to explore new ideas that arise out of the needs and circumstances of a certain time or age,<sup>60</sup> but rather conflicts about the appropriate (re)presentation of these ideas within the context of a certain age. It is through these conflicts that traditional ideas become charged with presentness and actuality, that these ideas become capable of representing and analysing the present age. Benjamin here refers to an idea of philosophy in general that is usually called “*philosophia perennis*” (perennial philosophy). This normative claim of a *philosophia perennis* that sets strict rules about what philosophy is concerned with, connects Benjamin’s Preface closely to the three names he has mentioned before: Plato, Leibniz, Hegel. Plato is regarded as an occidental founder of *philosophia perennis*, Leibniz is considered to be the modern founder of a scientifically-grounded *philosophia perennis*, Hegel ranks finally as the consummator of this idea. Of course, each represents different kinds of *philosophia perennis*. In broad terms, at least four basic models of “*philosophia perennis*” can be distinguished:<sup>61</sup>

A. The eternal subjects of philosophy derive from a teleological structure that integrates all individual historical philosophies and philosophical concepts. In the end, all different philosophies align in a hidden purpose, i.e. they share a common teleological aim, the “last philosophy” which sublates them all and brings their concepts to their final and ultimate shape. Retrospectively, in the light of this final shape, the history of philosophy has always been about the same concepts and subjects; each was present merely in different stages of representation and completion which express the various interests, aspects and possibilities of a certain age. Hegel is surely the most important philosopher of this kind of “*philosophia perennis*”. At the very end of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, this idea of a *philosophia perennis* is expressed most clearly:

But the other side of its Becoming, History, is a conscious, self-mediating process —Spirit emptied out into Time; but this externalization, this kenosis, is equally an externalization of itself; the negative is the negative of itself. This Becoming presents a slow-moving succession of Spirits, a gallery of images, each of which, endowed with all the riches of Spirit, moves thus slowly just because the Self has to penetrate and digest this entire wealth of its substance. And its fulfilment consists in perfectly knowing what it is, in knowing its substance, this knowing is the withdrawal into itself in which it abandons its outer existence and gives its existential shape over to recollection.<sup>62</sup>

Exponents of this version emphasise either the conceptual elusiveness of this final, ultimate stage of philosophy at which all the other stages aim, and thereby consider it as a kind of a “regulative idea”.<sup>63</sup> Or they emphasise the actual realization of this normative kind of philosophy in the form of a certain historical philosophy that has to be understood as the teleological goal of the history of philosophy (Hegel).

B. Perennial subjects come to light in philosophy via the actuality of recurring basic truths or truthful objects or beings represented. These appear in the most diverse philosophical contexts, every time philosophy comes close to truthful insights, as a kind of “objective norm” for philosophical thinking to verify how appropriate it is according to the eternal essential standards of being and knowledge. The Christian philosophy of the Middle Ages worked in this way, since the undisputable and eternal truths and dogma of Christian doctrine provided the ground, the norms and the standards by which philosophy was pursued and evaluated. In the modern age, Martin Heidegger re-stated —of course with decisive changes to the content of this truthful being— such a *philosophia perennis*, when he claims that the only real content of philosophy in every age is the “thinking of being”:

To bring to language ever and again this advent of being that remains, and in its remaining waits for human beings, is the sole matter of thinking. For this reason essential thinkers always say the Same. But that does not mean the identical.



C. Philosophy is not seen as an archive of eternal truths, but as a continuum of recurring problems. The main questions of philosophy are therefore limited in number, even if the possible answers are not —although they are neither infinite nor arbitrary. This is, of course, the most secularized, so-to-speak “weak” form of a “philosophia perennis”. In his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Arthur C. Danto shares the spirit of this kind of “philosophia perennis”:

I believe the set of things of philosophical moment to be logically closed, and that the energy of philosophy requires the serious and systematic philosopher (and there can be no other kind) sooner or later to work through the whole cycle of internally related topics, so that inevitably he will come to art, if indeed it falls within the cycle, supposing he started elsewhere, or that he will come to whatever else is within the cycle if he has begun with art.<sup>65</sup>

D. Philosophy is not the recurrence of eternal truths or problems, but of eternal “names”. The “name” stands for more flexible spaces of thinking and designations that are, at the same time, confined, limited and highly determined, so that their wider scope is neither arbitrary nor infinite. Nor are these “names” as fixed as eternal truths or conceptual doctrines would be. They can be seen as recurring, weakly determined, normative principles and rules of reflection (the “entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on, shared by the members of a given community”) about philosophical subjects. Thomas Kuhn’s term “paradigm” comes close to these sort of recurring “rules as a basis for the solution of the remaining puzzles” in philosophy,<sup>66</sup> although the philosophy of “names” in that sense is more metaphysical, restrictive and nominalistic than Kuhn’s historical approach. This is Benjamin’s position, and despite its differences, it fits well into an understanding of philosophy that includes Leibniz and especially Hegel as its central modern figures: each works within a common field of “philosophia perennis” that spans and holds together its family-like versions.

What is distinctive about “philosophia perennis” is that it sees both history and eternity, time and timelessness as essential to truth. Philosophical knowledge cannot ignore the way in which its basic insights are unfolded in history, since this unfolding is integral to the existence of truth. But at the same time, history is not the foundation and ground of truth, only its way of appearing and its empirical content. Philosophical truth is not simply determined by historical circumstances or subject to infinite historical variation (although undoubtedly it is always subject to this influences), since it expresses more than what changes through time. Regarding this structure, Benjamin reintroduces the term “monad” into philosophy to describe the way in which philosophical truths (“ideas”) stand outside of history without being simply unhistorical or eternal, and to describe the way in which these truths deal with history without being merely subordinate to it (OR, 47f.; GS I.1, 227f.). Thus in the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin states:

Resolute refusal of the concept of “timeless truth” is in order. Nevertheless, truth is not —as Marxism would have it— a merely contingent function of knowing, but it is bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike. This is so true that the eternal, in any case, is far more the ruffle on a dress than some idea. (AP, 463 [N3,2]; GS V.1, 578)



This concept of a *philosophia perennis* is of course neither natural nor without any alternative within philosophy. On the contrary, strictly historical views of philosophy which claim the absolute historical situatedness of philosophical meanings, and therefore their finiteness, due to history's unpredictability, also exist in the modern age, as well as scientific, merely logical or naturalized ideas of philosophy that do not consider the historical development of thinking as essential to truth at all. At the same time as Benjamin was writing about *philosophia perennis* (1920), Helmuth Plessner stated the following view which denies any meaningful coherence and unifying structure to the history of philosophical systems: "In this inner unrelatedness from system to system, which no historical continuity of series of problems can belie, in this isolation of one philosophy against the other, in this tragic loneliness of the work, philosophy is most similar to art."<sup>67</sup> Seen in this way, the Epistemo-Critical Prologue belongs to a realm of philosophy which is closely connected to Hegel, which is why we can reasonably expect from it forms of thought and argumentation that would not necessarily conflict with certain aspects of Hegelian philosophy, contra existing Benjamin-research.

It is striking how this idea of a "*philosophia perennis*" in the Prologue seems partly to clash with Benjamin's later and much more famous philosophy of history in the Theses on the Philosophy of History—which may be why his earlier view on history in the Prologue (of course not least because it is limited to the subject of the history of philosophy) has not sparked much interest among Benjamin-researchers. In the Theses, Benjamin develops an idea of history that approaches it as a continuity-in-catastrophe, a never-ending process of destruction and violence against the oppressed class that can only be stopped by the help of divine force carried out in class struggle against the victorious ruling class. Moreover, the messianic salvation from history is seen as the task of class struggle<sup>68</sup> in order to establish a completely new order of (messianic) time against the empty time of historical progress, the latter always working only for the oppressors in society.<sup>69</sup> History has to be recognized in a fresh, productive as well as a destructive way through "dialectical images"<sup>70</sup> which break the false ideas of historical homogeneity and meaningful, rational progress in order to reveal history's hidden, actual structure of oppression and growing emptiness. Against that view of history, the idea of a *philosophia perennis* seems at least in some degree to trust in a historical reason that realizes itself in terms of the progress of philosophy: at least by preserving a rationality in valid ideas that is not open to historical decay. Benjamin clearly sees the "objectivity with which history has endowed the principal formulations of philosophical reflections" (OR, 37; GS I.1, 217): i.e. it is historical progress itself that evolves the inner rationality of certain concepts in order to prepare them to become recurring names of the truth. Even if this idea of a normative logic of truth-giving historical time in philosophy is not, as in Hegel, organized according to the concept of ultimate teleology and absolute inclusion, it entertains important relations and structural homologies to it.

This idea occurs for a second time in Benjamin's work in the fundamental epistemological discussion of "truth content" and "material content" at the beginning of his essay on Goethe's novel *Elective Affinities*:

Critique seeks the truth content of a work; commentary, its material content. The relation between the two is determined by that basic law of literature according to which the more significant the work, the more inconspicuously and intimately its truth content is bound up with its material content. If, therefore, the works that prove enduring are precisely those whose truth is most deeply sunken in their material content, then, in the course of this duration, the concrete realities rise up before the eyes of the beholder all the more distinctly the more they die out in the world. With this, however, to judge by appearances, the material content and the truth content, united at the beginning of a work's history, set themselves apart from each other in the course of its duration, because the truth content always remains to the same extent hidden as the material content comes to force. [...] In this sense the history of works prepares for their critique, and thus historical distance increases their power. If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a burning funeral pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Whereas, the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma: that of what is alive. Thus, the critic inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what has been experienced.<sup>71</sup>

This is a really dense passage with much to comment on. For our purpose, it is important to notice how Benjamin ascribes a truth-giving power to historical time in a very dialectical manner. As the quotation shows, material content and truth content certify each other, because the quality of their unity within a work also defines their individual quality in distinction from or even in opposition to each other: the truth content by itself is dependent on the level of unity in which it is essentially related to the material content. Their relation can therefore be described, to use a term from Friedrich Hölderlin, as “harmoniously opposed” (*harmoniscentgegengesetzt*), which means that the opposed unite “by way of opposing, through the meeting of the extremes insofar as these are not comparable with respect to content but with respect to direction and degree of opposition, such that it also compares what is most hyperbolic”.<sup>72</sup> Thus the “conflict” consists in the way in which “one is coherent with itself”:<sup>73</sup> an eminently Hegelian thought that provides the norm of the relation between material content and truth content. The truth content of a work depends on its unity with the material content, i.e. the historical appearances in which it is realized. But at the same time, the truth content only fulfils and actualises itself when it separates from the material content by opposing it: when it becomes a contradiction in itself by its opposition to the material content which belongs so closely to the truth content that both oppose themselves and each opposes the other. And the medium, by which this opposition that is at the same time a higher form of their unity appears, is historical time. The dispersion of temporal progress means that the material content dies out, i.e. it becomes unfamiliar, unknown, obsolete, out-dated and questionable to later generations, and thereby brings the truth content to representation: “On the differentials of time (which, for others, disturb the main lines of the inquiry), I base my reckoning” (AP, 456 [N1,2]; GS V.1, 570). This view of history seems a little bit more productive, more positive than the bleak image of the Theses: although again, it focusses on the powers of decay that historical time brings. How positive this idea really is can be seen in the way it reoccurs in the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, especially in *Truth and Method*. Famously, Gadamer is a thinker who emphasises, in contrast to Benjamin, not the catastrophe but the divinity of tradition; historical continuity and heritage as the basis of existence for every human being. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer states:

Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted. Hence temporal distance is not something that must be overcome. [...] In fact the important thing is to recognize temporal distance as a positive and productive condition enabling understanding. It is not a yawning abyss but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which everything handed down presents itself to us. [...] Only when all relations to the present time have faded away can their real nature appear, so that the understanding of what is said in them can claim to be authoritative and universal.



In Gadamer's philosophy, the productive hermeneutical opposition between material content and truth content appears to be an effect of the divinity of time. Precisely in and through their difference and separation they hold together all being and fulfil their telos: the disintegrating force of time is historically arranged in the continuity of tradition and heritage, the one and only necessary condition for human beings to cope with reality. Benjamin, of course, would strongly object to this view. But his idea of a *philosophia perennis* maintain links to this kind of philosophy, without an explicit mediation between them: The force of decay that historical time is, generates the "truth content" as the residue in which the dissolving history is captured and saved.

Remarkable is not only the dialectical structure of material content and truth content, but a more general trait of Benjamin's thinking that I like to describe as a "metaphysical rationalism of distinction". Benjamin's whole philosophy is determined by an emphatic Platonic norm of dihairetic difference-making,<sup>75</sup> which means that critical thinking is anxious to employ the essential faculty of reason against the infinite ambivalence or haziness of myth.<sup>76</sup> Finally, the opposite of all reason, myth, is often characterized by a lack of distinction and demarcation, and is described in metaphorical terms as undergrowth:

To cultivate fields where, until now, only madness has reigned. Forge ahead with the whetted axe of reason, looking neither right nor left so as to not succumb to the horror that beckons from deep in the primeval forest. Every ground must at some point have been made arable by reason, and must have been cleared of the undergrowth of delusion and myth. (AP, 456f.; GS V.1, 571)

"[T]he relation between myth and truth [...] is one of mutual exclusion":<sup>77</sup> The relation between the rational and the irrational, the sane and the insane, the just and the unjust, falls under the same norm as one of its elements (the rational). The norm of distinction that reason and truth contain by themselves also determines the relation of truth to its negation, myth. Benjamin's concept of the concept (*Begriff des Begriffs*) in the Prologue re-enacts this norm of distinction for concepts completely;<sup>78</sup> it corresponds therefore to Hegel's negative-dialectical moment of opposition.<sup>79</sup> How philosophically intrigued Benjamin is by the idea of reason as organ and substance of distinction, can easily be seen in an important fragment from the Arcades Project which also gives an idea of Benjamin's concept of dialectics:

Modest methodological proposal for the cultural-historical dialectic. It is very easy to establish oppositions, according to determinate points of view, within the various "fields" of an epoch, such that on one side lies the "productive", "forward-looking", "lively", "positive" part of the epoch, and on the other side the abortive, retrograde, and obsolete. The very contours of the positive element will appear distinctly only insofar as this element is set off against the negative. On the other hand, every negation has its value solely as background for the delineation of the lively, positive. It is therefore of decisive importance that a new partition be applied to this initially excluded, negative component so that, by a displacement of the angle of vision (but not of the criteria!), a positive element emerges anew in it too —something different from that previously signified. And so on, ad infinitum, until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocatastasis. (AP, 459 [N Ia,3]; GS V.1, 573)

What Benjamin here describes is, to speak with Niklas Luhmann, the “re-entry”-logic of negative dialectics as the core of critical reason. To employ reason means to apply distinctions upon themselves, i.e. to create distinctions and then reintroduce the form of distinction to one side of the distinguished, thus negating the former negation by negating one of its results again, and so on. With this, Benjamin sketches the figure of a self-negating negation just like in Hegel’s dialectics:[80](#) Reason reaches the representation of truth by a self-generating, strictly negative logic of distinction and reflexivity upon all contents. Different from Hegel, the progress in reason and therefore its inner time of development and realisation is determined by an ever-growing, sprawling entropy of differences and oppositions which generate themselves through themselves —whereas Hegel thinks that the dialectical movement, especially in the Science of Logic, is strictly bound to an equation of difference and unity whose proliferation and contraction are governed by the norm of unifying the different without erasing it.[81](#) But one would fall short of Benjamin’s text if one overlooked that it also contains an idea of absolute unity, very strongly expressed in the notion of “apokatastasis panton”, the “salvation of everything”. This moment of unity does not occur as the motor of the whole process of reason, as in Hegel, but appears rather as the aim of the whole dynamic structure, an aim that suddenly and abruptly emerges from the moment of its highest opposite, the almost absolute expansion of distinctions, i.e. negativity. This structure of a sudden and unexpected paradox, whereby a common perspective turns, seemingly without reason (because this reason is hidden in the “secret”), into its opposite, Benjamin calls “allegory”. At the end of the book about the German Trauerspiel, Benjamin states:

For it is precisely visions of the frenzy of destruction, in which all earthly things collapse into a heap of ruins, which reveal the limit set upon allegorical contemplation, rather than its ideal quality. The bleak confusion of Golgotha, which can be recognized as the schema underlying the allegorical figures in hundreds of the engravings and descriptions of the [baroque], is not just a symbol of the desolation of human existence. In it transitoriness is not signified or allegorically represented, so much as, in its own significance, displayed as allegory. As the allegory of resurrection. Ultimately in the death-signs of the baroque the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed; on the second part of its wide arc it returns, to redeem. [...] And this is the essence of melancholy immersion: that its ultimate objects, in which it believes it can most fully secure for itself which is vile, turns into allegories, and that these allegories fill out and deny the void in which they are represented, just as, ultimately, the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of resurrection. (OR, 232f.; GS I.1, 405f.)



Within the baroque mentality of melancholy and the baroque representational technique of allegory, Benjamin deciphers the systematic idea of reason in a historical shape, which adds important dimensions to the abstract form of dialectical negativity. The self-generating progress of rational distinctions is illuminated as a path of destruction, as shattering the false unity of history into a “heap of ruins”. The negativity of reason is thus emphasised even more in its destructive, ruinous aspect, so as to make the final allegorical turn into unity all the more effective. As Benjamin also points out in a short text named *The Destructive Character*, the allegorical negativity of reason intentionally puts the prospects and processes of reason at stake, lets them fall into dimensions of pure destruction, purposelessness and despair to find themselves as forces of unity and salvation only in the waste and ruins of the shattered world that allegory has produced. Allegory is the representational and even logical form of “critical disintegration”, as Benjamin calls it: the power of reason to set free the internal differences within things and between things, against the false connections they were forced into, the process of diversifying the world completely anew so as to win back its bound, hidden possibilities of being that reveal a better, more just, more free existence. Benjamin’s idea of “critique” as the most fundamental philosophical instrument of reflexive reason therefore furthers Hegel’s concept of “determinate negation” (*bestimmte Negation*).<sup>82</sup> By “determinate negation”, Hegel means the opposite of “abstract negation”: according to him the common and misguided way philosophy understands the work of negativity is to see only the negative result of the negation of something from outside; such negation “resolve[s] itself into nullity, into abstract nothingness”.<sup>83</sup> “But then philosophy does not stop at the merely negative result of the dialectic, as it is the case with scepticism. The latter mistakes its result, insofar as it holds fast to it as mere, i.e., abstract, negation.”<sup>84</sup> To abstractly negate a given X from “outside”, means to erase it completely from consideration by denying its validity as a whole; therefore, the X vanishes from the scene of representation and leaves nothing but nothingness. Hegel opposes such a formal-logical theory of negation in a double way: internally, by showing its logical fallacies regarding a more complex understanding of negativity and its role in the production of fundamental meaning; and externally, by showing its pragmatic uselessness and fruitlessness in interrupting the chain of meaning without any possibility of further connection to the growing emergence of conceptuality. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel says: “The one thing needed to achieve scientific progress [...] is the recognition of the logical principle that negation is equally positive”.<sup>85</sup> The first categories of the *Science of Logic* within the *Logic of Being*, “being” and “nothing”, function not only as the starting point of the logical development. They also allow the common belief in abstract negation to be illustrated and criticised more efficiently: since the hidden identity of “being” and “nothing” which, despite their mutual contradiction, enables the development of both into the concept of “becoming”, can only be understood if the abstract negation of “being” and “nothing” —formally speaking, their contradictory opposition (*kontradiktorischer Gegensatz*)— is not the only form of negativity between these categories, and if both categories in their isolation are recognised as themselves results of an abstract negation.<sup>86</sup> Against this kind of (abstract) negation, Hegel emphasises that

a negation is not just negation, but is the negation of the determined fact which is resolved, and is therefore determinate negation; that in the result there is therefore contained in essence that from which the result derives [...]. Because the result, the negation, is determinate negation, it has a content. It is a new concept but one higher and richer than the preceding —richer because it negates or opposes the preceding and therefore contains it, and it contains even more than that, for it is the unity of itself and its opposite.

This passage is crucial to Hegel's idea of negativity and dialectics. Furthermore, it serves as a reference point and hidden norm for Benjamin's (and subsequently Adorno's) idea of critique. In other words, the concept of "critique" in German Critical Theory participates in fundamental ways in the Idealistic tradition. This is obvious in the case of Adorno, who always points out his inseparable connection with Hegel.<sup>88</sup> But it is also true of Benjamin, whose thinking rests on conceptual decisions highly similar to Hegel's philosophical patterns. Critique is only truthful if it emerges as "determinate negation" from the reflexive consideration of the subject itself in its negative capacities: "Falsity must not be demonstrated through another, and as untrue because the opposite is true, but in itself".<sup>89</sup> Critique means to retrieve the inner contradictions of a subject: the ways in which its meaning is constituted through discrepancies between its layers of description, between itself and other subjects, between claim and reality, norm and fact. But this representation of the system of contradictions and the kind of contradictions, in which the subject is interwoven, serves a productive, affirmative purpose: to gain a new stage of meaning or a real or utopian perspective of understanding which encloses its contradictions —not as dissolving forces into "nullity", but as integrated "moments"<sup>90</sup> of a better, higher, more real and more true meaning, one that entails the self-criticism of the subject matter as foundation of its philosophical endurance. As "determinate negation" philosophical critique negates its subject matter in terms of its own inner negativity, in order to reach beyond its current stage of being towards a better understanding of what it could or should be, according to its semantical and ontological possibilities. As "immanent transcending" ("immanente Hinausgehen"),<sup>91</sup> critique is endowed with a goal and a determinate content, but at the same time is forced to approach the criticized subject matter solely according to its intrinsic values, and with great care and thoughtfulness, in order to find the norm of its determinate negation and therefore allow a conceptual transformation within the terms of its own inner distinctions. To be "critical" regarding a certain subject matter therefore means to bestow on it a fundamental responsibility and faith in its own internal routines of correction: its hidden, subconscious knowledge of its better, truthful state of being.<sup>92</sup> Thus, a critical idea is "the content in itself, the dialectic which it possesses within itself, which moves the subject matter forward", as the "simple rhythm" of the "immanent emergence of distinctions" ("immanente[n] Entstehung der Unterschiede") as the motor of its productive becoming-itself.<sup>93</sup> Already in his dissertation on the Romantic idea of critique (*Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* / *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*, 1919), Benjamin —referring to Schlegel and Novalis— developed a theory of the "medium of reflection" (*Reflexionsmedium*) as inner, truthful form of being itself or the "absolute":

In itself, this absolute would most correctly be designated the "medium of reflection." With this term, one may characterize the whole of Schlegel's theoretical philosophy, and in what follows it will be cited not infrequently under this rubric. [...] Reflection constitutes the absolute, and it constitutes it as a medium. Schlegel did not use the term "medium" itself; nonetheless, he attached the greatest importance to the constantly uniform connection in the absolute or in the system, both of which we have to interpret as the connectedness of the real, not in its substance (which is everywhere the same), but in the degrees of its clear unfolding.



Because “critique comprises the knowledge of its object”,<sup>95</sup> it has a paramount role for the Romantics as well as for Benjamin: The term “critique” becomes the core of epistemology as well as ontology. Although his concept of critique shows important differences from the romantic idea,<sup>96</sup> these rest upon fundamental concordances between both theories. More precisely: Benjamin’s strongly Hegelian reading of Schlegel’s theory of the reflexive “absolute” as the objective critical form of being itself, no matter how accurate a reading it is of Schlegel’s own view, offers decisive insights into how Benjamin develops a theory of critical thinking. Importantly, this theory comes very close to certain ideas of negativity and its role within a philosophy of the “absolute” which we find in Hegel. The “absolute” is the all-encompassing conceptual system of everything, that provides the rational structure of being by forming a non-abstract, sufficiently determined coherence of negativity and reflexivity within everything, and thus terminates in a stage of non-exclusive, all-enclosing self-knowledge. Furthermore, this “absolute” is constituted by the dynamics of a process which works by a dialectical-critical movement of “determinate negation”, in order to release the rationality of its subject matter through the dialectical (critical-negative) transgressing of its false or abstract determinations in relation to itself and to others. It points towards a truthful understanding of these false determinations, according to the absolute conceptual norm they secretly contain by their participation in the “absolute”. Benjamin and Hegel may differ greatly on the function, coherence, context and meaning of this structure of the “absolute”. But both of their theories of the “negative reason of the absolute” coincide in their basic framework. Benjamin thus makes highly Hegelian claims about the romantic concept of absolute knowledge:

The theory of knowledge of objects is determined by the unfolding of the concept of reflection in its significance for the object. The object, like everything real, lies within the medium of reflection. [...] In all its determinations the absolute remains, therefore, a thinking absolute, and a thinking essence is all that fills it. With this, the basic principle of the Romantic theory of object-knowledge is given. Everything that is in the absolute, everything real, thinks; because this thinking is that of reflection, it can think only itself, or, more precisely, only its own thinking; and because its own thinking is full and substantial, it knows itself at the same time that it thinks itself. [...] All knowledge is self-knowledge of a thinking being, which does not need to be an “I”. [...] For the Romantics, from the standpoint of the absolute, there is no “not-I,” no nature in the sense of a being that does not become itself. [...] The germ-cell of all knowledge is thus a process of reflection in a thinking being through which it gains knowledge of itself. All the capacity to be known on the part of a thinking being presupposes that being’s self-knowledge.<sup>97</sup>

Critique aims an objection at the abstract deficiencies of the subject—but in the name of the subject itself. To “build even in demolishing the object” (GS I.1, 87), by critically shattering the object within the functions of the object itself, and in order to fulfil and truly establish its being—this idea of an objective critique follows ideas of negativity and dialectics very close to Hegel’s philosophy.



Though dialectics is conceptualized by Benjamin in a way partly at odds with Hegel, both share the same aims, presuppositions and basic structures. This is apparent even when we consider seemingly remote subjects such as baroque theories of art. Allegorical unity functions as the “negation of negation”<sup>98</sup> or further as “negation in itself” or “negation which has being only as self-referring”,<sup>99</sup> i.e. its positive meaning emerges from its strongest negation within its opposite. Allegory therefore realises the almost helpless dissemination of negativity as a kind of unleashed power of reason which suddenly turns into the affirmative. “Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst/ Das Rettende auch.” —But where there is danger,/ A rescuing element grows as well“, as Hölderlin’s poem Patmos says; lines that Benjamin and Adorno both loved. So, the idea of a self-reflexive and self-referring negativity is sometimes —as the example of allegory shows— emphasised even more in Benjamin than in Hegel: because here, the whole idea of a positive and ultimate unity of truth appears as mere effect of a negativity that has been let loose, in the end it has nothing left to negate and distinguish but itself. To stick to the dynamics of distinction in reason without any reservation, that means to dedicate yourself completely to the negative power of keeping things more and more separate, and to trust completely in the course and history of truthful meanings which evolve therefrom: This is the way of the philosopher and the emblem of his world-historical importance. “What matters are never the ‘great’ but only the dialectical contrasts, which often seem indistinguishable from nuances. It is nonetheless from them that life is always born anew.” (AP, 459; GS V.1, 573) Moreover, a certain dimension of the “logic” of history that Benjamin develops in some of his most important texts fits perfectly with this idea of an absolute negative-allegorical reason. Particularly in his short text Theologico-Political Fragment (1920/21 or 1937/38),<sup>100</sup> Benjamin furnishes his catastrophic idea of the negativity of history as continuity of misery (Theses on the Philosophy of History) with a variation of Hegel’s “ruse of reason” that corresponds to the allegorical turn into unity and salvation. On the one side, history is completely separated from the idea of salvation. Any action within history and by historical subjects can in part only increase the problems and catastrophic aspects of historical progress, can only extend the negativity. Benjamin states:

Only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic. For this reason nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic. Therefore the Kingdom of God is not the telos of the historical dynamic; it cannot be set as a goal. From the standpoint of history it is not the goal, but the end.

Along with the distinction between “telos” and “dynamis”<sup>102</sup> as different stages of movement that no longer connect, Benjamin absolutely separates the historical from the messianic dimension of time. History on its own cannot have a relation to salvation, i.e. to a state of being in which all of damaged life could be solved and saved. The moment of messianic time does not fall within historical progress; it is not a mode of historical change. Their relation is exterior, non-causal; rescue or salvation is far from a reasonable expectation or hope.<sup>103</sup> That means there is no physical or conceptual connection between the two states of time, at least no self-sufficient form of action which turns history into salvation without external support; there are no sufficient causes (Ursachen) and no reasons (Gründe) for messianic time to appear in historical time. This does not mean that Benjamin denies the possibility or meaningfulness of revolutionary actions: on the contrary, he constantly reflects on different kinds of political, philosophical or aesthetic actions and their impact on historical change, as well as on their temporality. But none of these historical modes of action are sufficient by themselves to dissolve history into salvation: through them, salvation can be glimpsed but not reached. As in Kierkegaard’s philosophy, there remains a “gap” which human actions cannot bridge, and which only gets wider the more we try to leap over it. But at the same time, a “weak messianic power”<sup>104</sup> is inalienably part of every generation and every individual: an unswayable, irrational, useless and unusable, though reliable relation to salvation, one that lies outside the usual idea of relation and its modes of action. The single individual feels it in moments of “happiness”, which Benjamin calls the “rhythm of Messianic nature”.<sup>105</sup> Because in happiness, as Benjamin argues, the “ruse of reason” in its most negative, most hidden form becomes perceptible for the individual. Benjamin describes this ruse with the following image:

If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction; but just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom.

Again, we find the idea of the “harmoniously opposed” which echoes Hölderlin; Benjamin’s image tries to connect effect and disconnection, coherence and hiatus between the historical and messianic order without claiming any kind of direct or indirect coherence or interaction between them. Only in the negative relation of historical to messianic time, in a distinction that drives them infinitely apart, in the recognition of their indispensable difference lies the possibility of their connection. Again, we can see how Benjamin pushes the idea of negativity even further than Hegel, because the dialectical turn into its opposite, i.e. the positive unity, is far from being a logical “mechanism” that is always inhibiting and limiting negativity by being the predictable occurrence of a rule. Historical and messianic orders secretly correspond through their negative relation, being the destructive counter-force of each other. By negating each other, i.e. by fully approving and executing their opposition, which hinders any teleological transition between them, both fields of time secretly support each other in preparation for an impossible but enduring coincidence: “The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption”.<sup>107</sup> The most secret announcement of this “quietest approach”<sup>108</sup> of their unity lies in experiences of happiness, because for Benjamin the true emotion of happiness —where it is no mere hollow joy— always participates and combines two opposing conditions: “For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall, and only in good fortune is its downfall destined to find it.”<sup>109</sup> Happiness marks the transience of all reality in the moment of its highest being: when we are happy in a true sense, reality shows itself to us in a state of completeness that at the same time refers to its vanishing, because by definition happiness is made to disappear again. In happiness the character of time itself therefore becomes perceptible in the condensation of a *kairos*, a momentary epiphany: Everything is made to go to ruin. Happiness marks the “eternal and total passing away”<sup>110</sup> as messianic sign of nature, because in it a hidden core of eternal surviving appears, barely perceptible. There is a similar figure of thought in the classical theory of beauty that is taken up again in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*: Hegel states that the classical sculptures of the gods always seem to have a “touch of sadness”<sup>111</sup> around them that is caused by the logic of their beauty in relation to its mode of being. Because in every existing beauty, its own vanishing appears together with its full apparition: the finite and material being seems most inadequate in the moment of its beauty, because the perfection of appearance in beauty longs for something higher, something eternal as mode of its being that would allow it to stay forever. This linking of catastrophe and salvation, annihilation and completion also marks true happiness and exposes the inner truth of historical time in the course of its negativity, a negativity that is not directly related to salvation, but also not sufficient and infinite in itself. Through happiness, instead, a secret force is activated within all finite beings that Benjamin again expresses in an image: “As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward the sun which is rising in the sky of history. A historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of all transformations.”<sup>112</sup> The dialectical turn from the negative progress in time, or the growing progress of negativity, does not explicitly and directly turn dialectically into the positive, the unified: Benjamin does not allow a purely constitutional or lawful, inferential or causal relation between both conditions. Salvation in Benjamin’s thinking, although it also proceeds as a dialectical process in the sense of a historical “ruse of reason”, is based on a stronger release of negativity than in Hegel and therefore something concealed, almost impossible, hiding in the underground, abrupt, discontinuous, unexpected, indeducible, but growing simultaneously with the unfolding of the negative, until it seemingly disjointedly appears —because it corresponds at heart to the rationality of the negative, as we have seen in the discussion of the *apokatastasis*-fragment. In Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* we find the words:

The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world, everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists —and if it did exist, it would have no value. If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the world sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie within the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental. It must lie outside the world.



Similar to this, Benjamin upholds the idea of a non-relative, intrinsic and non-transient meaning of being that is salvation and exists only outside the historical world, unrelated to it, but with a secret reason in common with it. In Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, we find the dictum: "Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique."<sup>114</sup> Benjamin's thinking —and this can, in my opinion, be understood as a kind of general rule for him — always tries to explore the structure of an impossible tertium within contradictory oppositions. In this example, history and messianic time, as well as the positive and the negative view of reason in history, are connected by a reason that does not mediate them but at the same time does not separate them absolutely. What is left then, is the idea of a connection that is unthinkable by the mere alternatives of difference and unity, non-mediation and mediation: a relation between the truth of history and an outer, divine norm of being that is both necessary and impossible, given and unavailable to reason. To endure this contradiction is the sign of reason; to intellectually "feel" the energies of this otherness, namely the unity and salvation within the course of rational and historical negativity, is the ability of reason. This leads to the idea of the "exteriority" of truth that is vital to Benjamin's conception of epistemology in the Prologue.

There is also an external "clue" to a positive relation between Benjamin and Hegel, i.e. a historical analogy that shows how meaningful and productive this kind of transgression against the usual limits of research can be. The subject of this analogy is Hegel himself, namely the history of his reception within Analytic Philosophy.<sup>115</sup> The renaissance of Hegel in the Analytic tradition since the mid-20th century, after his vehement rejection by the first generation of Analytic philosophers (Carnap, Russell, Moore etc.), is based on philosophical aspects of Hegelian thought that reoccur in new form in Benjamin's thinking: the critique of epistemological immediacy, a kind of holism in epistemology, the difference between knowledge and truth, the more complex and far-reaching concept of the concept. Furthermore, the path Analytic philosophy has taken from a strong proximity to Kant and a refusal of Hegel to the opposite, correlates in its starting point with the state of Benjamin-research today. Also one should notice that Analytic Philosophy found its way back to Hegel via an internal self-criticism<sup>116</sup> that brought it into objective proximity to Hegel without its proponents having actually read Hegel, at least at first: the same way I claim Benjamin to be in objective proximity to Hegel regardless of actual lines of reception. At least, the simplistic contrast drawn between Benjamin and Hegel as an opposition between what is old, bygone, metaphysical, dogmatic, authoritarian (Hegel) and what is new, modern, multiversal, open, anti-dogmatic (Benjamin) should be abandoned, in the light of the modernity which Hegel's image has retrieved in philosophy today. Even the early Analytic philosophers such as Bertrand Russell praised Hegel for enriching the imaginative possibilities of thinking:<sup>117</sup> a characteristic which fits exactly with Benjamin's manner of philosophy. And finally, Ludwig Wittgenstein's relation to Hegel can be used as an analogous example for understanding the objective relation of Benjamin to Hegel: because even though Wittgenstein often refused Hegel's thinking as well as any claim to know Hegel (as did Benjamin), research has meanwhile pointed out the many objective correlations between Wittgenstein's and Hegel's thought.<sup>118</sup>

I close this second lecture by developing briefly the common starting point for both Benjamin's and Hegel's epistemology —their critique of Kant's transcendental theory of knowledge and experience. This is very important because it allows us to explain some congruencies or similarities between Benjamin's and Hegel's metaphysics in terms of their similar point of departure and a similarly negative reference point. We find Benjamin's explicit critique of Kant first and foremost in his text *On the Program of the Coming Philosophy* from 1917. This unpublished text remains difficult in many respects and I won't interpret it in its entirety, nor go into the perspectives on it in the Benjamin-research. I only want to pick out some fundamental aspects that link this text closely to the critique of Kant by Hegel.<sup>119</sup> When Benjamin wrote this text in 1917, he still considered himself to be a Kantian philosopher, because he was socialised academically into the Neo-Kantianism of Freiburg, and was still considering writing his thesis on Kant's philosophy of history. In a letter to Gershom Scholem written at the time, Benjamin states:

There will never be any question of the Kantian system's being shaken and toppled. Rather, the question is much more one of the system's being set in granite and universally developed. The most profound typology of conceiving doctrine has thus far always become clear to me in Kant's words and ideas. And no matter how great the number of Kantian minutiae that may have to fade away, his system's typology must last forever. [...] In fact, the only thing I see clearly is the task as I have just circumscribed it, that what is essential in Kant's thought must be preserved. (CR, 97; BR I, 150)

The perennial relevance of Kant's thought to Benjamin turned out to be rather short-lived: a month later, Benjamin tells Scholem in the next letter: "As far as Kant's history of philosophy is concerned, my exaggerated expectations have met with disappointment". (CR, 105; BR I, 161) And half a year later, in May 1918, he writes to his friend Ernst Schoen about his philosophical demands: "The greatest adversary of these thoughts is always Kant." (CR, 125; BR I, 187) The cause of this sudden change of mind may in part be a very simple one: in the same letter as just quoted, where Benjamin speaks emphatically about the granite eternity of Kant's philosophy, he admits that: "I have not yet read the relevant works by Kant." (CR, 98; BR I, 151) Some weeks later, when he has read Kant, he seems to have found him inappropriate for most of his own philosophical plans. In the light of this, it is most interesting that Benjamin, in the above-mentioned letter and in the Program-text, starts with a very specific approach to Kant that reiterates the relationship of the first German Idealists (Fichte, Schelling, Schlegel) to him: an approach that distinguishes between the "letter" and the "true meaning" or "spirit" of the Kantian system. In the English translation of the quotation that I have read out about the granite Kantian system, the term "letter" which is used in the German original gets lost: Benjamin does not speak of "Kantian minutiae" but of the "Kantian letter" that has to fade away. The distinction between the "letter" and the "spirit" of Kantian philosophy allowed the German Idealists, especially Fichte,<sup>120</sup> to change all the problematic parts and intentions of Kant's philosophy and to do so in Kant's name. It allowed them to claim themselves to be the true heirs of Kant, who follow and honour their great predecessor, while actually developing their own, mostly anti-Kantian philosophies. They claimed to have understood Kant better than Kant understood himself, so that the true "spirit" of Kantian philosophy must be upheld even against literal statements of Kant's work. The distinction between "letter" and "spirit" was therefore an attempt to uphold the impression that the heritage of the great Kant was not violated while in fact his whole system was being turned upside down. Benjamin repeats this strategy. At the beginning of the Program, he states: "The historical continuity that is ensured by following the Kantian system is also the only such continuity of decisive and systematic consequence."<sup>121</sup> Under the cloak of being a true and faithful Kantian, Benjamin is then able to criticise some of the most important fundamentals of Kant's epistemology, claiming that he is only enforcing what Kant already had in mind or what lay hidden in his misunderstood philosophy. On this basis, the critical distinction within the Kantian system can be made without fear of losing the Kantian model altogether: "It is of the greatest importance for the philosophy of the future to recognize and sort out which elements of the Kantian philosophy should be adopted and cultivated, which should be reworked, and which should be rejected."<sup>122</sup> For example, Benjamin blames Neo-Kantian philosophers such as Hermann Cohen for having misread the concept of "experience" in Kant by sticking to the literal words of his texts, whereas Kant himself had something different in mind: "For there is no doubt that Kant does not intend to reduce all experience so exclusively to scientific experience, no matter how much it may belong, in some respects, to the training of the historical Kant."<sup>123</sup> Benjamin concentrates in his essay then on reducing the "obstacle to linking a truly time- and eternity-conscious philosophy to Kant"<sup>124</sup> by discussing the main aspects of metaphysics that must be revised in Kant in order to make philosophy topical again. Benjamin firstly identifies the problems with Kant as rooted in the inferiority of his age, the Age of Enlightenment. Reiterating the critique of Enlightenment given by Hegel in his early work on Fichte und Schelling (Differenzschrift),<sup>125</sup> Benjamin recognizes the "religious and historical blindness of Enlightenment"<sup>126</sup> as the reason for "the lower and inferior nature of experience in those times", namely the reduction of the whole order of being and corresponding kinds of experiences to mere scientific, simplicistic and naturalistic forms of knowledge. I won't go into how appropriate this highly one-sided view of Enlightenment as a period of mere rationalism and naturalism really is—in Hegel's as well as in Benjamin's view.



What matters is that Benjamin here follows the path taken by Hegel's critique of Kant, namely the general description of the deficiencies of Enlightenment, the attempt to enthrone a one-sided natural-scientific world-view, and the specific problems with Kant's epistemology which arise from that. In addition, Benjamin shares with Hegel the critique of the key role played by abstract subjectivity in the [Kantian, J.U.] theory of experience, knowledge and truth;<sup>127</sup> a way that leads (both agree) to psychologism in philosophy. Such psychologism becomes for Benjamin — following Husserl whom he had read—<sup>128</sup> one of his targets, despite his many links to psychoanalysis. Thus Benjamin recognizes the main and underlying problem of Kant's epistemology to consist in the inadequate, one-sided, impoverished concept of experience that forms its framework: "This simultaneously presents the primary challenge faced by contemporary philosophy and asserts that it can be met: it is, according to the typology of the Kantian thought, to undertake the epistemological foundation of a higher concept of experience."<sup>129</sup> This "higher concept of experience" should enable a certain kind of philosophy that Kant's concept was unable to provide: "Kant's epistemology does not open up the realm of metaphysics, because it contains within itself primitive elements of an unproductive metaphysics which exclude all others."<sup>130</sup> This demand for a new kind of metaphysics which would transgress the Kantian boundaries, boundaries which had restricted metaphysics to a purely subject-based cognition of nature and to the methodologies of the natural sciences and mathematics, matches exactly the critique of Kant by Hegel. Hegel also tries to forge an idea of metaphysics that regains the objectivity, comprehensiveness, universality and validity of the ancient metaphysical systems of Plato and Aristotle without ignoring the achievements of the critical or transcendental philosophy; furthermore, this new metaphysics was to include dimensions that are ignored or critically rejected by Kant, such as history, religion and language. All these features reoccur in Benjamin's description of metaphysics given in these texts and partly accomplished in the Epistemo-Critical Prologue. The aspects which Benjamin then names in the Program can all be related to key statements from Hegel: "The most important of these elements are, first, Kant's conception of knowledge as a relation between some sort of subjects and objects or subject and object [...] [and] the object nature of the thing-in-itself as the cause of sensations".<sup>131</sup> Hegel states in the Encyclopedia: "The Critical philosophy [...] does not address the content and the specific relationship that these thought-determinations have vis-à-vis each other. Instead, it examines them with a view to the opposition of subjectivity and objectivity in general."<sup>132</sup> "Determinateness remains something external for thinking in this way at its highest point; continues to be an entirely abstract thinking that is called reason here throughout."<sup>133</sup> Conversely, Benjamin explicates his program in a true Hegelian sense:

The task of future epistemology is to find for knowledge the sphere of total neutrality in regard to the concepts of both subject and object; in other words, it is to discover the autonomous, innate sphere of knowledge in which this concept in no way continues to designate the relation between two metaphysical entities.



Furthermore, when Benjamin states “Philosophy is based upon the fact that the structure of experience lies within the structure of knowledge and is to be developed from it”,<sup>135</sup> he reiterates Hegel’s notion of the “absolute idea” or “the concept” from the Science of Logic, which represents the wholeness and unity of being and its various experiences in a universal, all-encompassing structure of self-knowledge.<sup>136</sup> Benjamin demands a theory of the “continuity of experience, representing experience as the system of sciences”, because “a way must be found in metaphysics to form a pure and systematic continuum of experience”;<sup>137</sup> such a system is exactly what Hegel tried to provide in his Phenomenology of Spirit. Finally, Benjamin remarks that “everywhere in modern philosophy the recognition crops up that categorical and related orders are of central importance for the knowledge of an experience which is multiply gradated and nonmechanical”,<sup>138</sup> and which aims at the systematic and universal “unity of experience” that again Hegel had tried to formulate in the Phenomenology. It can be seen that Benjamin shares with Hegel a discontent about certain fundamental aspects and ideas of Kant’s epistemology, and that both —despite their different historical and systematic contexts— reach certain highly similar conclusions about (and agree on the aims of) a new metaphysical epistemology.

# Third Lecture

## The Hegelian Metaphysics of the Epistemo-Critical Prologue

In this third Lecture, I want to give a very selective interpretation of Benjamin's most difficult text, the Epistemo-Critical Prologue (Erkenntniskritische Vorrede) from his book *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (the translation of the title changes constantly between different editions: *German Trauerspiel* —German mourning play— *German Tragic Drama*). In line with the general theme of these lectures, I want to illustrate what close connections the Prologue has to some fundamental aspects of Hegel's metaphysics. Thus, my goal is to demonstrate the virtue of reading the Prologue and Benjamin's epistemology in the light of Hegel's *Logic*. This demonstration therefore tries to prepare the ground for such an analysis by finding evidence, analogies and meaningful constellations between the concepts and arguments Hegel and Benjamin employ. Within the confines of these lectures, we cannot perform or replace such an analysis, but we can clear its way. To justify this demonstration we have, in the preceding lectures, examined some conditions and presuppositions of this question which revealed significant details about Benjamin's own way of thinking about philosophy and history. Since the Prologue is such a difficult text, both in style and content, and since its argumentation is internally so multi-layered, a sufficient analysis would have to proceed on a sentence-by-sentence basis.<sup>139</sup> Adorno once wrote that the Prologue is "so much more difficult than anything in Kant"; Gershom Scholem simply said: "I regard the whole thing as totally incomprehensible"; and George Steiner stated that the Prologue must be regarded as the "richest, most complex chapter in the history of the German Language".<sup>140</sup> This is easily the impression one could get after a first reading of the text. I want to reduce the complexity of the subject, therefore, by selecting only a few main assertions from the Prologue which can very obviously be linked to Hegel's philosophy, thereby isolating them from the complex interplays and further developments they undergo in the Prologue. To be more precise, I will give not a complete interpretation of the Prologue and all of its central terms and arguments, but explain some possible directions of interpretation and some guiding principles of Benjamin's theory, principles that could offer productive insights into the philosophical potential of the text.

The genesis of the Epistemo-Critical Prologue, its contexts and biographical background, are complicated and confusing.<sup>141</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to realize that Benjamin designed his most coherent draft of a metaphysical or categorical theory of knowledge and truth not in the form of a substantial work, but as a Prologue to a specific subject that seems to have very little in common with theoretical philosophy: a literary history of German tragic drama of the 17th century, its historical circumstances, literary characteristics, intertextual relations, themes and content. German literary scholars often completely ignore the philosophical dimensions, thanks to the seemingly narrow intention of the text as a Prologue. They typically reduce its metaphysical complexity and are suspicious of any attempt to explore deeper layers of meaning that go beyond the function of giving specific methodological guidance for the literary-historical subject discussed. It is one of Benjamin's techniques, one he himself comments on in the Prologue, to develop the most universal aspects of reality and knowledge inside the most narrow, apparently arbitrary historical subjects: because every instance of being in time carries an index to redemption as well as creation (as defined in the concept of "origin"),<sup>142</sup> which means it contains a claim about (and a permanent connection with) events of absolute meaning. He calls this "monadological" thinking<sup>143</sup> and thereby considers a truly philosophical way of writing to consist in exploring the universal depth that opens up to speculative thought even in the most singular, most overlooked, most arbitrary and unimportant historical subjects. In an important fragment from the Arcades Project, that likewise discusses the main concept and function of representation (*Darstellung*) for a true philosophical work, this technique is mentioned: "Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse —these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them." (AP, 460 [NIa, 8]; GS V.1, 574) This kind of writing that uses its concrete subjects, limited and small as they may be, to contemplate and meditate upon them until —by turning the phenomenon into its "idea"— a whole world unfolds from them, operates (to use a metaphor from Georg Simmel)<sup>144</sup> like a "plummet"<sup>145</sup> in exploring the semantic depth of singular phenomenon. For a philosophy that acts like this, "the real world could well constitute a task, in the sense it would be a question of penetrating so deeply into everything real as to reveal thereby an objective interpretation of the world." (OR, 48; GS I.1, 228) To look upon something under the perspective of its idea, respectively in relation to the semantic structure of an idea, means to recognize that it "contains the image of the world" (OR, 48; GS I.1, 228), like monads do in Leibniz's philosophy.<sup>146</sup> From this it follows, regarding the Prologue itself, that scrutiny of the German tragic drama of the 17th century allows Benjamin to explore a theoretical philosophy of knowledge, truth and representation which transcends the limitations both of the specific subject (the tragic drama) and the academic discipline that is actually responsible for it (literary history). Moreover, one should consider the self-sufficient aspect of the Prologue, both in biographical terms —it was written to a large extent separately, after the main part of the book — and in structural terms— the intended incongruity and partial disconnect between Prologue and the main part. Benjamin consciously considered such a broken structure for the Tragic Drama book, but also for his later projects like the Baudelaire-work and of course the Arcades-Project, as can clearly be seen in some of his letters about the Baudelaire-project.<sup>147</sup> Thus, one has to distinguish carefully between genesis and validity, context of discovery and context of justification concerning the Prologue, and one has to be open-minded about the layers and dimensions of meaning that Benjamin gave this text or at least allows the reader to develop from the text, in order to see how much more than just a methodological introduction to a literary history of baroque drama it is —or at least how it can be understood in such a way.



The whole Prologue starts in medias res by first providing and exploring its main principle, to which all other concepts are functionally linked and from which they are derived: *Darstellung* (representation/presentation).<sup>148</sup> The opening lines read as follows: “It is the characteristic of philosophical writing that it must continually confront the question of representation.” (OR, 27; GS I.1, 207) As we will see in more detail, the translation of “*Darstellung*” with “representation”<sup>149</sup> is problematic in at least one respect: re-presentation suggests a certain ontological relation that the Greek origin of this concept, the term “*Mimesis*” in Plato and Aristotle, often defined as “imitation” or “reproduction”, implied.<sup>150</sup> The basic logic of this concept of representation can be roughly described as follows: Something that exists or is given independently from and prior to the process of representation, which also means something that exists as immediate being prior to its mediation in representation, is then repeated within the medium of representation by the process of representation, and thus exists in a representational duality (namely as being represented and as being representing). According to this Platonic idea, representation remains a process outside the represented being, secondary to its existence, irrelevant to its essence, and as copy of the original it is always ontologically inferior to the “thing itself” (whether it is a “higher” being such as in “idea” or an inferior being such as sensually perceptible matter, whether it is a general being such as generic terms or a singular existence such as Aristotle’s “first substances”): that is, in broad terms, the Platonic verdict on mimesis.<sup>151</sup> However, even in classical theory, e.g. in Descartes’ theory of representation in the *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia*, it has been noticed that representation cannot consistently be thought as absolutely external to the represented being and without any impact on it, but that it necessarily acts upon its mode of givenness. Representation initiates a certain change of existence in the represented being, in order to gain certain characteristics in the field of representation at all: most importantly, in representation a being becomes a representable being, i.e. it is transferred to a medium whose existence is partly or in toto representational, and thus determined by the function of representation.<sup>152</sup> Therefore the intrinsic values and ontological characteristics of the represented being become representational values and characteristics, i.e. they are encoded in the form of representational intentionality, signifying character, meaningfulness and significance. This process of transformation, e.g. how the actual tree outside our building becomes a subject within language and takes on as purely representational being, has always been regarded in philosophy as bringing certain gains and losses to the being represented. What it gains in distinctiveness and intellectual clarity by being represented, it loses in concreteness, materiality, determinacy and embeddedness in the infinite connections of reality.<sup>153</sup> The problems of representation which arise out of these very basic ambivalences are commonly known and form some of the most extensive and intricate topics in Western philosophy. Representation in the sense of “*Darstellung*”, a term and at the same time a concept which emerges in German philosophy in the midst of the 18th century, displays in comparison to that a stage of the theory of representation that already accomplishes a certain critique of the classical foundations of representation. Benjamin’s use of the term draws heavily on the reorientation of the discourse that occurred in the late 18th century and is connected with such names as Lessing, Herder, Fr. Schlegel, Kant, Fichte, Schleiermacher and of course Hegel.<sup>154</sup> In what follows I will always use the German term “*Darstellung*” if I refer to this revised concept of representation. One of the main characteristic of “*Darstellung*” and the guiding principle in all different uses of the term around 1800 (whether Aesthetics, Poetics, Epistemology, Ontology, Theory of Education), and from which all other conceptual features such as the special kinds of unity, distinctiveness, reflexivity or transgressiveness concerning the represented being derive, can be named “presence”. What “presence” means can best be seen in two different definitions from the 20th century —so to say legacies of the discourse of *Darstellung* from the 18th and 19th centuries. Jean-Paul Sartre in his work *Being and Nothingness* (1943) defines the concept of “phenomenon” as follows: “[The phenomenon] does not point over its shoulder to a true being which would be, for it, absolute. What it is, it is absolutely, for it reveals itself as it is. The phenomenon can be studied and described as such, for it is absolutely indicative of itself.”<sup>155</sup> The other definition comes from Hans-Georg Gadamer who, in his hermeneutics, also draws heavily on a Hegelian concept of “*Darstellung*”:

Hence *Darstellung* remains essentially tied to the original represented in it. But it is more than a copy. That the representation is a picture —and not the original itself— does not mean anything negative, any mere diminution of being, but rather an autonomous reality. So the relation of the picture to the original is basically quite different than in the case of a copy. It is no longer a one-sided relationship. That the picture has its own reality means the reverse for what is pictured, namely that it comes to presentation in the representation. It presents itself there. [...] But if it presents itself in this way, this is no longer any incidental event but belongs to its own being. Every such presentation is an ontological event and occupies the same ontological level as what is represented. By being presented it experiences, as it were, an increase in being. The content of the picture itself is ontologically defined as an emanation of the original.[156](#)

Hence, in *Darstellung* the being represented comes out “in the heightened truth of its being”[157](#): “In being presented [...], what is emerges” as a “transformation into the true”[158](#). There could not be a greater change in the theory of representation than a concept that redefines the rules of its application and the norms of its understanding in such a way. In the classical norm of representation, the represented and the representation are, in ontological terms, mutually external, as I have already pointed out: being in the form of substance is self-sufficient, immediate and reified, representation on the other hand is signifying, depicting, and just an accidental and secondary occurrence without an essential effect on the subject matter.[159](#) In *Darstellung*, as Sartre and Gadamer define the concept of “phenomenon”, the immediate being itself undergoes an ontological shift: On the one hand, being is thought of as representing itself, i.e. it is determined by a self-referential or self-reflexive relation that is both epistemological and ontologically valid. Therefore, the immediacy of being in *Darstellung* is always (to use Hegel’s terminology) “reflected immediacy” (*reflektierte Unmittelbarkeit*), i.e. it is not the mere opposite of mediation (and therefore representation) anymore, but is in itself mediation by representing itself. Its immediacy and therefore “being” is dependent on its irreducible mediation, even if this mediation consists in a purely inner self-relation without regard to any external otherness: “it is as reflected immediacy, that is, one which is only by virtue of the mediation of its negation”.[160](#) Therefore, being itself is only in the process of the representation of itself as inner difference to itself[161](#): it is grounded in the structure of mediation via representation which always precedes its givenness. At the same time, “to be” means to be epistemologically accessible by an “original” representation as ontological mediation in and by itself. Representation understood as *Darstellung* becomes the seal of the fundamental ontological reorientation of being as being: its undissolvable reference to representability is the effect of a change in the ontological pattern which now describes beingness as “constitutive reflexivity” (Hegel), i.e. as essential relatedness to itself and to others. In *Darstellung*, “Being” is thus essentially approachableness (*Erschlossenheit/ Zugänglichkeit*[162](#)). It consists of an inner difference to itself, since it exists only in the initial mediated distinction of the being represented and the representation, and finds its inner substantial unity only within the process of representational self-distinction that the logic of *Darstellung* provides. One can easily see how this logical infrastructure of being as original *Darstellung* promotes the idealistic notion of the universal form of self-consciousness that inhabits all being. In essence, *Darstellung* integrates the structures and forces of mediation in the form of negativity and reflexivity into the ontological language of objects or subject matters without erasing the difference between prior givenness of something and its subsequent representation. With this presupposition it becomes understandable how special kinds of representation can be conceptualised so as to grasp the truth of objects completely, despite their spatial, temporal and logical externality.



On the other hand, *Darstellung* cannot be thought of as mere constructivism —not least because the possibility of an external *Darstellung* itself grounds in the inner mediation of the subject as “expressionless”, merely ontological, objective kind of self-representation to which *Darstellung* relates to as prior to it. As Gadamer clearly points out, the being represented is not entirely the effect of the outer *Darstellung* but must be thought of as prior and at the same time subsequent to it, both independent of and originating from *Darstellung*. The qualitative and temporal differential between the prior and the subsequent stage of being in *Darstellung* is marked by what is for Hegel and for Benjamin the central epistemological norm, “truth”. *Darstellung* brings out the subject matter represented in the (onto)logical form of its truth by transforming its prior-to-representation-existence (that at the same time already inhabits the essence of representability in its ontological form of objective reflexivity) into its truthful stage of represented-being. It is because the represented subject matter achieves a new stage of being and reaches its unity with itself in *Darstellung*, i.e. it fulfils thoroughly what it is meant to be through its conceptual norm, that Benjamin can say that in the “idea” that is presented as *Darstellung* the subject originates —even if it has an actual existence before its *Darstellung*. The *Darstellung* brings out the truth of the being represented because it reacts to the inner representability that lies within the objective reflexivity of the subject matter, but at the same time is prior to *Darstellung* because it is in itself without the forces of expression that *Darstellung* provides.<sup>163</sup> We have seen in Lecture 1 that the special concept of “Origin” (*Ursprung*) that Benjamin develops in the Prologue enables him to describe such a moment of being in which the subject matter of *Darstellung* reaches a level of unfolding of its essence in the elements of its temporal and spatial coherence of representation. This can be understood as the space of its first real appearance and therefore as its origin, even if the *Darstellung* is not its actual beginning in time: „The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance.“ (OR, 45; GS I.1, 226) Therefore, this theory amounts to an ontological theory of truth, one that considers truth as a quality of a certain kind of being itself, not of mere utterances or propositions. Regarding the ontological theory of truth, Hegel is the main representative in modern philosophy. It is because of this structure of *Darstellung* that both representation and presentation, resemblance and construction, are insufficient translations of the term, because each ignores either the dimension of firstness (representation) or of secondariness (presentation) of the being in *Darstellung*. *Darstellung* is a concept designed to overcome the abstract opposition of representation and presentation in their strictest sense regarding the relation of prototype and copy. In *Darstellung*, being and representation, immediacy and mediation, priorness and subsequentness, being and concept are thought of as “determinations of reflection” (*Reflexionsbestimmungen*),<sup>164</sup> i.e. as already in themselves containing their opposites by being essentially related to their negation, each including and excluding their opposite. Thus it becomes decisive to understand the complex relations and systematic structures of the whole complex of representation as the grounding —rather than view the single, isolated elements as its fundamentals.<sup>165</sup> It is this kind of ontological double-bind and its reconciliation that the concept of *Darstellung* has tried to communicate and justify since its move from poetological debates into epistemological discourses in the late 18th century.



Of course in order to fulfil all these high expectations not every kind and instance of representation amounts to *Darstellung*. Hegel's *Science of Logic* as well as Benjamin's *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* are attempts to describe the conditions, presuppositions, rules and functions we need to apply to representation in order for it to count as *Darstellung*. In many respects, Benjamin differs from Hegel in that metaphysical description. But in some fundamental sense, both agree quite closely. The normative framework of the general, cohesive function of *Darstellung* is similar in both thinkers: The unity of *Darstellung* and critique, which is essential to Hegel's whole idea of *Darstellung*,<sup>166</sup> reoccurs in Benjamin's theory of the ontological as well as epistemological forces of *Darstellung* and must be seen as key to Benjamin's (and Adorno's) whole philosophy. By representing a subject matter through *Darstellung*, that is, representing it properly in its "idea", it becomes more than just the actual phenomenon and its adequate descriptive analysis: the subject matter's conceptual norms, aims, promises and possibilities of its being which are fulfilled and which are unfulfilled, and the contradictions and discrepancies within it, are made visible. Between being and concept, meaning and function, what it intends and what it actually does or expresses in its use and givenness—all this comes to light. *Darstellung* criticises the phenomenon in the name of its idea: the phenomenon is transcended towards its potencies, towards its complete ontological, epistemological and ethical unfolding. Thus *Darstellung* creates a "double exposure" of the phenomenon through its construction as "idea": analysing its givenness by certain means of differential conceptual representation and at the same time transcending its current limited state towards the norms of its full being. Recently, Giorgio Agamben has described the messianic state of things quite similarly: "According to the principle of messianic klesis, one determinate factual condition is set in relation to itself [...]. In this manner, it revokes the factual condition and undermines it without altering it."<sup>167</sup> Agamben quotes Heidegger: "Schematically said: something remains unchanged but is radically changed nevertheless."<sup>168</sup> Even without subscribing to the theological hope implicit in such an understanding, the structural and functional model remains valid: *Darstellung* creates a critical distance within a subject matter, a gap between its normative formal reality and its objective reality. This creation of an inner difference within phenomena without changing their essential or conceptual structure, forms an "objective reflexivity" that endows the subject matter with something like subjectless consciousness: it becomes unequal with itself in order to reach the full, integrated identity of its "Concept" by appearing within the "gap" of itself that *Darstellung* surveys, expresses and interprets.

Regarding the outline which I just sketched of the difference between *Darstellung* and mere representation, Benjamin and Hegel surely agree. For Hegel, it is well known that philosophy is the "exposition of how knowledge makes its appearance" ("*Darstellung des erscheinenden Wissens*")<sup>169</sup>. Reality is concordant with truth and thus actual in an emphatic sense only as manifestation (*Darstellung*) of the singular self-determining process of spirit. Hegel states:

Consciousness, as spirit which along the way of manifesting itself frees itself from its immediacy and external concretion, attains to the pure knowledge that takes these same pure essentialities for its subject matter as they are in and for themselves. They are pure thoughts, spirit that thinks its essence. Their self-movement is their spiritual life and is that through which science constitutes itself, and of which it is the exposition (*Darstellung*).<sup>170</sup>

The philosophical *Darstellung* of the self-development of spirit through the stages of *Logic* and "philosophy of the real" (*Realphilosophie*) is not something exterior or secondary to the process of the spirit. *Darstellung* is the original space of realization for spirit in the course of its becoming truthful actuality, although it is not the only form of its existence. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Science of Logic* aim therefore at the overcoming of the abstract oppositions that derive from common consciousness, such as subject and object, thing-in-itself and representational idea, eternity and temporality within the prior, more fundamental space of *Darstellung*: oppositions that construe the insufficient logic of representation as an external way of registering the prior conceptual contents and immediate subject matter according to the faculty of imagination and the "Doctrine of Being". Therefore, Hegel declares:



Pure science thus presupposes the liberation from the opposition of consciousness. It contains thought in so far as this thought is equally the fact as it is in itself; or the fact in itself in so far as this is equally pure thought. As science, truth is pure self-consciousness as it develops itself and has the shape of the self, so that that which exists in and for itself is the conscious concept and the concept as such is that which exists in and for itself.[171](#)

Therefore, the important function of the concept “Darstellung” derives for Hegel from his critique of one-sided idealist or realist philosophies of the relation of mind to reality, of thinking to being. Each takes only one side of this relation as fundamental, essential, active, prior and truly actual, while the other side is secondary, derivate, passive, representational, mere appearance of the other. Against this, Hegel stresses the idea that philosophical Darstellung fulfils the very essence of reality by overcoming the abstract opposition between thought and reality, mind and being, prototype and representation, through the philosophical unfolding of spirit as a dense, highly complex and negative set of meaningful relations which gradually move towards conceptual unity as the complete self-expression of being. Being achieves its true form of actuality and thereby its complete state of self-consciousness only through the reintegration of its unfolding distinctions, contradictions and oppositions, such as subject/object, being/thinking, represented/representation etc., into a Darstellung which provides its own mode of time and space for spirit’s self-development. What is really actual, and therefore true in an emphatic sense, is the Darstellung by which spirit unfolds itself as the meaningful, rational coherence of understanding in which individual elements, things, facts and relations of mere reality become representations of themselves. That means, if you recall the definitions given by Sartre und Gadamer, that they reach a state of complete approachableness by opening up to the whole semantic network of their inner and outer determining relations. Hegel’s model of Darstellung, as you can easily see, needs to be holistic: only a form of presentation which enables conceptual multidimensionality, different relational structures and stages of relationality, growing complexity and comprehension, without losing its coherence, is qualified for the metaphysical role of Darstellung. Thus, in his Logic as well as in the “philosophy of reality” (nature and culture) Hegel understands the systematic representation and the process of developing the unity of the whole system not as a mere secondary transcript of the process of the Absolute, but as the original existence of truthful being in the sense of Benjamin’s origin (Ursprung): as field of the increasing self-fulfillment of being through the process of its critically-developing self-representation, i.e. as Darstellung.

In the Prologue, Benjamin uses the term Darstellung in exactly the same way. Right at the beginning, he criticises an idea of philosophical representation that thinks of it as a “spider’s web [...] to ensnare the truth as if it were something which came flying in from outside.” (OR, 28; GS I.1, 207) Philosophy has to be “representation (Darstellung) of truth”, not “a guide to the acquisition of knowledge” (OR, 28; GS I.1, 207f.): this means its content is not merely a representational copy of something existing for itself prior to it. Philosophy should not be a methodological manual for constructing knowledge like the natural sciences, as representational content of a consciousness, but should function as the autonomous Darstellung of self-developing conceptual truth. Just as for Hegel, Benjamin conceives Darstellung as the holistic, truth-enabling and truth-holding, self-realising structure of a “conceptual order” (“Begriffsordnung”, OR, 32; GS I.1, 212) that is based on the “underlying idea” (“Inbegriff ihrer Methode”, OR, 29; GS I.1, 208) of truth-constituting unity: “the demand for flawless coherence in scientific deduction is not made in order that truth shall be represented in its unity and singularity: and yet this very flawlessness is the only way in which the logic of the system is related to the notion of truth” (OR, 33; GS I.1, 213). The initial, primary mode of the existence of truth and thereby of true being in Darstellung which characterises Hegel’s theory recurs quite clearly in Benjamin’s similar critique of the conventional concepts of representation. Darstellung appears for Benjamin as the systematic, self-unfolding connection of ideas: “Ideas are the object of this investigation. If representation (Darstellung) is to stake its claim as the real methodology of the philosophical treatise, then it must be the representation (Darstellung) of ideas.” (OR, 29; GS I.1, 209) Benjamin’s use of the ancient term “idea” (eidos) acquires its layers of meaning from diverse sources, e.g. from a complicated reading of Plato’s Sophistes.[172](#) For our question it is important to stress the fact that ideas, as the content of Darstellung, provide the way in which elements, things and facts of being become essential within Darstellung: as their universal, but at the same time concrete conceptual, truthful core. This includes the norm of their full unfolding as well as their rule or infrastructure of composition. In order to do that, ideas are both pre-given and formed, prior and secondary to Darstellung —they thereby recall the Hegelian double-bind of Darstellung which we dealt with earlier. On the one hand “Ideas are pre-existent” (“Die Ideen sind ein Vorgegebenes.”, OR, 30; GS I.1, 210); on the other, Ideas exist only in und through the configuration of Darstellung (34) because: “Ideas are not among the given elements of the world of phenomena.” (OR, 35; GS I.1, 215) In a similar way to Hegel, Benjamin tries to develop a mode or technique of philosophical truth that is essentially bound to a holistic structure of the self-representation of elements, which become meaningful und understandable through the way in which they conceptually “unlock” each other. They unlock each other only in and through the semantic forces that the progressive coherence of Darstellung provides.[173](#) Philosophical truth consists solely in the way in which conceptual knowledge unfolds itself through a rich set of negative and positive relations which function as a framework for understanding, and it presents this unfolding as the essence of being, as its source-code or software.

From this common ground between Benjamin and Hegel, some further common claims can be derived. As with Hegel, Benjamin is a harsh critic of every idea of immediacy within *Darstellung* —at least every immediacy that stands in mere abstract opposition to mediacy and is therefore thought to be completely unmediated.<sup>174</sup> Philosophical truth cannot be understood as something that is in itself immediate, i.e. without mediation through otherness in different modes. It cannot rest on an immediate, absolutely fundamental ground that is in itself without relationality to itself or to others;<sup>175</sup> and it cannot be understood as something that is perceived immediately, e.g. through intellectual intuition (*intellektuelle Anschauung*). “The being of ideas simply cannot be conceived of as the object of intuition, even intellectual intuition.” (OR, 35; GS I.1, 215) As Hegel objects to Fichte’s, Jacobi’s and Schelling’s attempt to restore the idea of an “intellectual intuition” neglected by Kant,<sup>176</sup> in order to solve certain fundamental problems of the Kantian system, so Benjamin objects to the phenomenological attempts to revive this idea via the method of a Platonic “looking at things” (*Schau*, OR, 35; GS I.1, 215).<sup>177</sup> Furthermore, Benjamin, like Hegel, criticises the common assumption that truth in philosophy can only be conceived via subject-predicate-utterances or judgements, i.e. via the attribution of predicates to subjects, in relation to a reality-under-description, and therefore through the fundamental unit of predicative propositions. Benjamin participates thereby in the critique of external, truthless, atomistic propositions that Hegel develops for the first time in the “Preface” of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>178</sup> Against the inappropriate notion of a fixed, stable, immediate subject to which predicates are inflexibly attributed, and expressions of truth that consist in single propositions, Hegel intriguingly describes an idea of the truth in *Darstellung* which recurs in Benjamin’s Prologue.<sup>179</sup> Hegel speaks of the “logical necessity” as “rhythm of the organic whole” of *Darstellung*,<sup>180</sup> and later on compares the true relation of Subject and Predicate in philosophy with the “conflict that occurs in rhythm between metre and accent. Rhythm resulting from the floating centre and the unification of the two. So, too, in philosophical propositions the identification of Subject and Predicate is not meant to destroy the difference between them, which the form of the proposition expresses; their unity, rather, is meant to emerge as a harmony.”<sup>181</sup> Benjamin uses a similar set of metaphors to describes the performance of *Darstellung*, calling it a “digression” (OR, 28; GS I.1, 208), i.e. it is beyond the efficiency of pure syllogistics or logical inferences, and suggesting that: “this continual pausing for breath is the mode most proper to the process of contemplation. For by pursuing different levels of meaning in its examination of one single object it receives both the incentive to begin again and the justification for its irregular rhythm.” (OR, 28; GS I.1, 208) In this way, certain kinds of logical and structural rhythm, developed through the irreducible, multidimensional, polyvalent, overdetermined and multidirectional web of *Darstellung*,<sup>182</sup> and understood as evolving an interplay or alternation of conceptual unities and differences, application and separation, stability and change, determine the movement of *Darstellung*. The mechanical form of Subject-Predicate-utterances and its limitations are transgressed in order to achieve a quality of *Darstellung* that produces what is for Hegel as well as for Benjamin a fundamental characteristic of being and of truth: vitality as “life” and “movement” of the “Concept” and the “truth”.<sup>183</sup>

On this basis, Benjamin develops a concept of truth that is remarkably analogous to certain determinations given by Hegel.<sup>184</sup> For Hegel, there is a decisive difference between truth (*Wahrheit*) and correctness (*Richtigkeit*) which refer to two different levels of knowledge, and this distinction helps establishes his ontological theory of truth. In his *Lesser Logic*, the first part of the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel states:

It is one of the most fundamental logical prejudices that such qualitative judgments such as “The rose is red” or “is not red,” can contain truth. Correct they may be, but only in the restricted confines of perception, finite representation, and thinking; this depends on the content which is just as finite, and untrue on its own account. But the truth rests only on the form, i.e., on the posited Concept and the reality that corresponds to it; truth of this kind is not present in the qualitative judgment, however.<sup>185</sup>

In the “Addition”, Hegel continues:



In ordinary life correctness and truth are very often considered to be synonymous, and hence we often speak of the truth of a content when it is a matter of mere correctness. In general, correctness is only a matter of the formal agreement of our representation with its content, whatever kind this content may otherwise be. Truth, on the contrary, consists in the agreement of the object with itself, i.e., with its concept. It may certainly be correct that someone is ill, or has stolen something; but a content like this is not “true”, for an ill body is not in agreement with the concept of life, and similarly theft is an action that does not correspond to the concept of human action. From these examples it may be gathered that, no matter how correct it may be, an immediate judgment, in which an abstract quality is asserted of something immediately singular, simply cannot contain any truth; for subject and predicate do not stand to one another here in the relationship of reality and concept.[186](#)

Hegel distinguishes between truth and correctness as different models of knowledge with different elements, functions and rules. Correctness resembles the classical *adaequatio*-theory of truth as correspondence between thought (or proposition) and reality,[187](#) and is seen as an inferior, insufficient mode of knowledge: because in correctness, the form of referring to facts may be true, but the facts represented themselves may not be. Truth for Hegel is not achieved if someone states true propositions about an untrue content, i.e. a content which has not reached its truthful state of being according to the norms of its full concept. Truth in representation therefore is a matter of form and therefore of *Darstellung*, as Hegel points out: a matter of the form of being in which something has realized the complete reason of its meaning, a matter of the conceptual space of possibility that demands implementation or actualisation, as in Aristotle’s idea of “*hylé*”/ “*morphé*” and its mode of becoming (“*dynamis*”/ “*entelechia*”). Truth consists in the “agreement of the object with itself, i.e. with its concept” that is reached in its self-realising unfolding within the processes of *Darstellung*. Hence, truth cannot be a purely descriptive feature of propositions, but is bound to a strong sense of normativity which determines the truth of something as its complete self-fulfilment, according to the ontological, ethical, epistemological capacities its concept contains. Its base unit of measurement cannot—in an atomistic sense—be the single positive proposition that covers “that [which] is the case”,[188](#) but only the holistic structure of unfolding the meaning and being of something into the semantical relations it entertains to itself and to other units of being, hence the *Darstellung* as its essential mode of self-consciousness that inherently belongs to it and its actuality. This concept of truth in Hegel has a long philosophical prehistory and post-history: from Plato’s theory of truth and knowledge in the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist* up to Heidegger’s distinction between “correctness” and truth as “freedom” and as “concealing” in “On the essence of truth” (1930/ 43) from *Pathmarks*. Benjamin is part of that tradition. In the Prologue, he says:

Truth, bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas, resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge. Knowledge is possession. Its very object is determined by the fact that it must be taken possession of—even if in a transcendental sense—in consciousness. The quality of possession remains. For the thing possessed, representation is secondary; it does not have a prior existence as something representing itself. But the opposite holds good of truth. For knowledge, method is a way of acquiring its object—even by creating it in consciousness; for truth it is self-representation, and is therefore immanent in it as form. Unlike the methodology of knowledge, this form does not derive from a coherence established in consciousness, but from an essence. Again and again the statement that the object of knowledge is not identical with the truth will prove itself to be one of the profoundest intentions of philosophy in its original form, the Platonic theory of ideas. Knowledge is open to question, but truth is not. [...] As a unity of essence rather than a conceptual unity, truth is beyond all question. (OR, 29f.; GS I.1, 209f.)

Here, we have almost all the features that we have already discussed, gathered in one place: the primary process of *Darstellung* with its guiding principle of self-representation as “increase in being”; the ontological function of the form of *Darstellung* that gives meaningful, norm-governed presence to truth so that the existence itself becomes truthful. The distinction between knowledge (in the original it is *Erkenntnis* or *Erkennen*, i.e. cognition) and truth is added to clarify the mode of truth Benjamin aims at. For Benjamin as for Hegel, truth as such is an ontological quality of a being that represents and primarily unfolds itself in the constellation of *Darstellung*. *Darstellung* thus belongs intimately to this truthful being and is not seen as mere outer and inferior reduplication; it is the ontological form of “approachableness” (*Zugänglichkeit*) in which being comes to itself when multiplying in the presentable relations of a meaningful and significant order of self-representing. Similarly to Hegel, Benjamin separates this kind of truth from the idea of truth as a form of consciousness, such as we see in the classical Cartesian theory of truth:<sup>189</sup> truth is not a perceptive quality of the content of consciousness that is then expressed in truthful utterances. It is interesting that Benjamin rejects this idea primarily by referring to the property of “possession” that seems to be more a term from social or political philosophy.<sup>190</sup> Truth is not part of the goods that can be property of someone. It is therefore not material like isolated goods, although it is concrete and existent in the appearance of *Darstellung*. It is not an element of the economic exchange of goods and the accumulation of any kind of capital; it cannot exclude other subjects from participating in it. It does not even have the transcendental Kantian form of subjectivity as object given to someone in the modes of consciousness. Instead, in *Darstellung*, truth exists independently from the subject, as something completely unpossessed by it, in the subjectless “subjective” figures of reflexivity, conceptual meaning and self-reference.<sup>191</sup> Finally, it remains always to be reached (here again, the romantic impulse in Benjamin appears) without the consolation of being already possessed; it is always “silent” in response to our efforts. What it means for truth not to be open to question, is explained further on:

Truth does not enter into relationships, particularly intentional ones. The object of knowledge, determined as it is by the intention inherent in the concept, is not the truth. Truth is an intentionless state of being, made up of ideas. The proper approach to it is not therefore one of intention and knowledge, but rather a total immersion and absorption in it. Truth is the death of intention. [...] The structure of truth, then, demands a mode of being which in its lack of intentionality resembles the simple presence of things, but which is superior in its permanence. Truth is not an intent which realizes itself in empirical reality; it is the power which determines the essence of this empirical reality. (OR, 35f.; GS I.1, 216)



Truth is not subject to question and intention: Benjamin always loves to give his claims a strong, apodictic phrasing, but sometimes that can lead to a lack of clarity. Of course, he obviously does not mean that truth is inaccessible to human beings, whose expressible cognitive access is always intentional, i.e. an object relation with a content for someone.<sup>192</sup> What Benjamin rejects is the idea of a reification and limitation of truth to the objective form of isolated contents of consciousness, an idea that arises out of the reciprocity which questioning and intentionality display. The truth of *Darstellung* is not limited to the a priori equivalence or exchange relationship of question and answer, i.e. to the categorical limits of transcendental subjectivity that always restrict answers to the subjective possibilities that lie transcendently within questions,<sup>193</sup> and to the social limits of the logic of economic trading. Rather, it appears as something like an “offering” (Gabe). It is therefore not limited to the form of reference that subjective consciousness contains in its intentionality. On the contrary, the self-representing truth, as it develops an increase of being in *Darstellung*, may even transgress and remove the narrow transcendental and empirical-historical limitations of a certain knowledge that its subject matter contains. It is not limited to the discourses and ideologies of certain historical beliefs, because by the multiperspectivity and polysemy of the order of *Darstellung*, as well as by its normative claims and forces, it allows critical ideas about the elements represented in it to develop. The appropriate behaviour towards the truth is therefore what Hegel calls “reine Zusehen” (“simply to look on”),<sup>194</sup> a participation in the transgressing self-representing truth as a kind of autonomous process of being, with the chance to extend myself through critical meanings of being previously unknown and unprecedented. Regarding the double-structure of ideas in *Darstellung*, of course the question arises as to how this can be understood: In one respect, *Darstellung* is admittedly made by the historically situated and limited subject who shapes and frames the constellation of a philosophical text; Benjamin does not deny the author, the importance of intellectual or argumentative production and its historical circumstances as determining forces. On the contrary. But then, how can this be unified with the idea of the subject just watching and merely participating in the truth as an autonomous process of *Darstellung*? How can the individuals’s intentionality and cognitive activities avoid contaminating truth? This problem resembles certain difficulties that earlier appeared in Benjamin’s philosophy of language, or more precisely: Benjamin’s philosophy of language, as presented in the unpublished early text *On language as Such and on the Language of Man* (1916). In that text Benjamin sketches his epistemology and ontology of *Darstellung* by working out a problem-description that points to a more adequate nomenclature to work with than the philosophy of language: it points to the transition of the theological categories of language into the representational categories of a quasi-Hegelian epistemology. In an early letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal from the 13th January 1924, Benjamin summarises his ideas concerning the philosophy of language as follows:

That is to say, the conviction that every truth has its home, its ancestral place, in language; and that this place is constructed out of the oldest logoi; and that the insights of individual bodies of knowledge remain subordinate to truth grounded in this way, as long as they haphazardly resort to things from the sphere of language, like nomads, as it were, caught up in the view of the symbolic nature of language, which marks their terminology with the most irresponsible arbitrariness. Philosophy, in contrast, knows the blessed efficiency of an order, by virtue of which its insights always strive for very specific words whose surface has been hardened in the concept but dissolves when it comes into contact with the magnetic force of this order, revealing the forms of linguistic life locked within. (CR, 228f.; BR I, 329)



Benjamin's philosophy of language, as it is presented in more detail in *On Language as Such*, is based on a fundamental ontological, linguistic and theological distinction that at the same time is highly normative. What expresses itself in language, i.e. what takes place as temporal occurrence within the figures and forms of language as the performative and gestalt-like potency of verbal signs, is given epistemological and ontological preference over what is uttered through language, i.e. the signified meaning language constitutes by the functional difference between sign and meaning and its functional contexts. The truthful "mental being" only communicates by its transition into the "linguistic being" that is expressed in language: "It is fundamental that this mental being communicates itself in language and not through language. Languages, therefore, have no speaker, if this means someone who communicates through these languages."<sup>195</sup> This distinction between in and through language is based on a theology of the "name": "The name, in the realm of language, has as its sole purpose and its incomparably high meaning that it is the innermost nature of language itself. The name is that through which [nothing], and in which language communicates itself absolutely."<sup>196</sup> Within the linguistic capacity of the name, the "intensive totality of language, as the absolutely communicable mental entity, and the extensive totality of language, as the universally communicating (naming) entity"<sup>197</sup> culminate. Naming, in Benjamin's theology of language, stands for capacities of language that allow one to express the innermost essence of beings—their formative linguistic principles, their inner linguistic forma—as the magical dimension of words by which all beings are completely recognised, unfolded and redeemed. This "magical community [of language] with things"<sup>198</sup> can only be appropriately and comprehensibly grounded—even more because Benjamin constructs a history of the decline of language, initiated by the Fall of man and leading to the present reign of signifying language<sup>199</sup>—if this dimension of language is rooted originally in the divine act of Creation (where naming, recognising and creating rest in perfect unity) and is accessible through the channel of revelation. Besides the many internal argumentative problems of this text and its central claims, the biggest problem remains the missing intellectual connectivity, both for Benjamin himself and all the research about him today. Because on divine creation, revelation and the supposed magical dimensions of language, further philosophical discussion seems impossible; the discussed dimensions of linguistic representation remain caught within the sphere of belief and outside advanced philosophical considerations concerning their function and their rationality for human representation. Of course, these dimensions of language and representation do not disappear because of the "problematic" justification and explanation Benjamin applies to them. On the contrary, the need for a secular, philosophically valid justification of dimensions of representation that transcend the subject-predicate scheme of propositional knowledge and its linguistic mode of arbitrary signified meaning becomes even more urgent. Benjamin's distinction between in and through language reappears for example in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent. What expresses itself in language, we cannot express by means of language."<sup>200</sup> And like Benjamin, Wittgenstein thereby traces possibilities of representation which are not expressed by or through language but appear or show themselves in language: primarily the categorical, fundamental patterns of thinking and saying, or the ultimately justifying "forms of life" and "world-pictures" which are already active in every use of language and are therefore not expressible through it.<sup>201</sup> We have already encountered Benjamin's "solution", his attempt at rebuilding the demands and requirements of these "magical" linguistic dimensions within a different framework of argumentation that allows more of a rational and in a narrower sense philosophical applicability.<sup>202</sup> Benjamin thus translates these demands and explications given for the "name"-dimension of language into a Hegelian set of concepts and arguments which maintains the critique of the purely propositional subject-predicate form of cognition ("correctness") and the weak representational character of arbitrary signs in the context of a theory of dialectical representational systemacy, an ontological theory of truth and a super-structure of *Darstellung* as truth-bearing reflexive form of the absolute ("idea").

But Benjamin does not stop at this point, because this change of argumentational paradigm is enriched with another set of theoretical figures that recalls the second side of the term “Darstellung” in its 18th century meaning: the aesthetic paradigm of Darstellung.<sup>204</sup> Again, Wittgenstein’s thinking displays highly concurrent strategies to Benjamin; in his *Philosophical Investigations*, he says: “What the picture tells me is itself.” That is, its telling me something consists in its own structure, in its own lines and colours.”<sup>205</sup> So, the aesthetic quality and logic of Darstellung, that is, its self-representational logic, i.e. its way of really incorporating its meaning (rather than conveying it propositionally) within the form-expressing (*formensprachlich*) figures and structures of the medium of Darstellung, comes into play when the representational forces of truth-inhabiting Darstellung have to be explained properly. In the modern aesthetic theory of the artwork that in different versions and with different focal points comes out of, amongst others, Schlegel, Kant, Hegel and Schelling, the logic of Darstellung is generally conceived as a two-step-process: firstly, the artwork is consciously made by the artist who thereby realizes his or her conceptions, ideas, imaginations, feelings, persuasions and intentions. At this level of production, the artwork is limited to the expression of the artist’s consciousness, which contains individual and intersubjective, conscious and unconscious elements. But then secondly, the limits of meaning according to which the artwork could be nothing more than product of its maker and his or her ideas, are transgressed by the surplus value of the aesthetic form, by the emergence of autonomy and the inner semantic “infinity” of the artwork through its overdetermining aesthetic composition.<sup>206</sup> An explanation of how this aesthetic transformation and overdetermination by form operates, this “origin” of the artwork as partly autonomous, self-representing, and how its conscious meanings are then transcended through the active criticism of specific works, would take us too far afield, because a wide range of theories and critiques are involved. For our topic, it is only important to see that Benjamin points, in a very similar way, to an emergence of autonomy and self-representing existence via the forces of the form of Darstellung, which then allow the truth to happen as a quality of Darstellung. Put briefly, this process relies on the self-reflexive unity of form and content, conceptuality and medium as well as the way in which meaning appears as complex, gestalt-like process within the artwork, i.e. is incorporated in the extension of a conceptual performance that involves all the different meaning-giving elements of the systematic relation of Darstellung and which cannot be summarized in single, atomistic, abstract propositions or concepts.<sup>207</sup> In connection with these “aesthetic” aspects of Darstellung, one could also explain how Benjamin resembles Hegel in applying the problem of essence and appearance, which Hegel treats extensively in the second book of his *Science of Logic*, to the concepts of truth and Darstellung.<sup>208</sup>

To elaborate this further, one has to deal with Benjamin’s theory of the inner structure of Darstellung and see its connections to Hegel. In the Prologue, Benjamin states:

The set of concepts which assist in the representation of an idea lend it actuality as such a configuration. For phenomena are not incorporated in ideas. They are not contained in them. Ideas are, rather, their objective, virtual arrangement, their objective interpretation. [...] then the question of how they [the ideas] are related to phenomenon arises. The answer to this is: in the representation of phenomena. [...] Ideas are to objects as constellation are to stars. This means, in the first place, that they are neither their concepts nor their laws. [...] Ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements’ being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and the same time redeemed; so that those elements which it is the function of the concept to elicit from phenomena are most clearly evident at the extremes. The idea is best explained as the representation of the context within which the unique and extreme stands alongside its counterpart. [...] It is absurd to attempt to explain the general as an average. The general is the idea. The empirical, on the other hand, can be all the more profoundly understood the more clearly it is seen as an extreme. The concept has its roots in the extreme. [...] It is the function of concepts to group phenomena together, and the division which is brought about within them thanks to the distinguishing power of the intellect is all the more significant in that it brings about two things at a single stroke: the salvation of phenomena and the representation (*Darstellung*) of ideas. (OR, 34f.; GS I.1, 214f.)



I have left out some parts of this difficult paragraph and cannot even sufficiently comment on the text.[209](#) The main focus of Benjamin's description of the structure and function of *Darstellung* has to be reconstructed through the terms "phenomenon", "concept" and "idea", and their relation to each other within *Darstellung*. To clarify this, Benjamin adds to the previous description:

Phenomena do not, however, enter into the realm of ideas whole, in their crude empirical state, adulterated by appearances, but only in their basic elements, redeemed. They are divested of their false unity so that, thus divided, they might partake of the genuine unity of truth. In this their division, phenomena are subordinate to concepts, for it is the latter which effect the resolution of objects into their constituent elements. [...] Through their mediating role concepts enable phenomena to participate in the existence of ideas. It is the same mediating role which fits them for the other equally basic task of philosophy, the representation of ideas. As the salvation of phenomena by means of ideas take place, so too does the representation of ideas through the medium of empirical reality. For ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements. (OR, 33f.; GS I.1, 213f.)

Very roughly, it can be said that Benjamin develops a sequence of levels which progress within the constitution of *Darstellung*; *Darstellung* then is the unity of this sequence of conceptual and inferential functions within a complex coherence of meaning. Concepts, according to the vital function of distinction for Benjamin that I already explained in the previous lectures, are functions of essentially related, non-abstract distinctions and oppositions as the main principles of reason.[210](#) Through them, empirical reality ("phenomena") gets formed in such a way that only the elements that bear essential meaning are included in the idea, i.e. the "material content" of the phenomena reflects the differential negativity of conceptuality, as in Hegel, in order to form the "truth content" of its *Darstellung* as a systematic structure of inferential relations. These "conceptualized" elements of the phenomenon are then able to form a "constellation" as a complex structure of *Darstellung* through which their idea gets represented. This is achieved through the non-reductive semantic coherence of all of its conceptual elements dynamically and dialectically commenting on, criticising, expanding and illuminating each other simultaneously. In order to do so, their inner relation within the coherence of the constellation has to be of a special kind.[211](#) Benjamin speaks of "extreme[s]" that "stand alongside [their] counterpart[s]", which is really no different from what Hegel means by the logical force of the absolute idea as dialectical and furthermore "absolute" negativity:

The dialectical moment is the self-sublation of these finite determinations on their own part, and their passing into their opposites. [...] The dialectic is [...] the immanent transcending, in which the one-sidedness and restrictedness of the determinations of the understanding displays itself as what it is, i.e., as their negation. That is what everything finite is: its own sublation.



Through the structure and function of the “extremes” within the constellation of *Darstellung* that relate to their counterparts and therefore to their negation, Benjamin incorporates Hegel’s idea of dialectical negativity as self-moving principle of the development of spirit. Furthermore, he marks this negativity as the inner logic and basic function of the idea, from which it derives its unity, stability, flexibility, its non-abstract concreteness, and its semantic possibilities (“objective interpretation”) to be the truth of something. Benjamin therefore shares Hegel’s quite radical approach of understanding truth based on the idea of “absolute negativity”, that is, as the “pure negativity which has nothing outside it which it would negate but which rather negates only its negative, the negative which is only in this negating.”<sup>213</sup> Hegel calls this “reflection” and defines it as “negativity relating itself to itself, and hence [...] being self-repulsion from itself”:<sup>214</sup> thus, self-negating negation as “absolute negativity” is thought to be the autonomous logic of pure negativity from which all positive categorical determinations (the “determinations of reflection”) derive. This idea of a pure, stable, productive, fundamental, reflexive, self-referential negativity at the core of every positive, essential and therefore truthful logic of being returns in Benjamin’s inner logic of the idea in the way in which the positive content of the constellation as *Darstellung* emerges as function from the pure negativity of the “extremes” negatively relating to each other. The way in which Benjamin develops this idea of “absolute negativity” without a reading of Hegel’s *Logic*, is quite interesting: it can be shown that he adopts a theory of dialectical negativity from Plato’s *Sophist* (also an important source for Hegel); this reading is hidden in the exoteric reading of Plato’s *Symposion* in the Prologue.<sup>215</sup> For our purpose, it is only important to recognise how close Benjamin’s inner logic of the “idea” comes again to fundamental claims elaborated in Hegel’s *Logic*.

Following the complexity of the inner structure of the ideas in *Darstellung*, and which has lead us to a theory of productive dialectical negativity, and looking back at all the evidence we have collected, I think it can be reasonably claimed that Benjamin's metaphysics contains strong objective relations to some of the core ideals of Hegel's theoretical philosophy. Of course what follows from this, how it can be interpreted further and made productive, what dimensions of Benjamin's thinking are opened up by this, must be subject to further examination and evaluation. The development of these similarities and close connections was not meant to show Benjamin as someone who is secretly unoriginal and epigonic. For the sake of clarity and space I have set aside all the many ways in which even the aforementioned similarities to Hegel at the same time amount to differences: in their context, in their argumentation, their language, intellectual background, and so on. Two important differences of many should at least be mentioned to illustrate this. Concerning the negativity in the dialectics that we just explored, Benjamin makes a decisive break with Hegel that can be understood as a shift from the mode of time to the mode of space as "transcendental" model for the dialectical order. The negative-dialectical relations between the concepts within a constellation do not move "forward" (in the order of a logical form of time, i.e. in sequence or chronology), as in Hegel's *Logic*, towards the "absolute idea" and from there back to the beginning; instead, their movement has been brought to a stand-still or a freeze-frame. Nevertheless, the dialectical movement has not disappeared: its conceptual energy has turned into a logical luminescence of the extreme elements, i.e. a special hermeneutical force of producing essential meaning within the spatial structure of the constellation. Benjamin's theory of dialectics is continuously characterized by the spatial idea of a "dialectics at a standstill" (AP, 10; GS V.1, 55) like an image, as "imaging of dialectics" (AP, 10; GS V.1, 55). And of course this structure is also conceived as the form of the messianic time. Therefore, Benjamin's later ideas of dialectics always focus on the idea of a dialectical image that consists of elements of past and elements of the "presence of the now" ("Jetztzeit"),<sup>216</sup> which are standing still in their negative-dialectical relation in order to burst the false continuity of history, and free the lost possibilities of the past for the sake of changing the present. Secondly, Benjamin's theory of truth and *Darstellung*, although similar to Hegel in many essential aspects, is marked by one important difference: Truth, as the ontological mode of *Darstellung*, is not completely logically and conceptually internal, i.e. it is not completely represented by *Darstellung* and entirely a function of the systematic conceptuality of the "absolute idea".<sup>217</sup> Truth remains partly, by an undissolvable "rest" (that recalls the "rest" of the "Shine" (Schein) within the "Doctrine of Essence" in Hegel's *Logic*)<sup>218</sup> an "absolute exteriority"<sup>219</sup> with respect to the constellation of concepts and ideas: it is not simply representable in its integrity, it does not fully appear within the performance of *Darstellung*. Benjamin tries to describe the way in which truth withdraws itself within *Darstellung* even while appearing in manifold ways: a description, incidentally, that is similar in many respects to the idea of truth as "aletheia" given by his early great opponent, Martin Heidegger ("On the essence of truth").<sup>220</sup> This incompleteness of the "truth content", its damaged being even in its most rational metaphysical form as *Darstellung*, remains as a stigma of the unredeemed world of which it is a part and at the same time its self-relation. The strong connection between Benjamin's thinking and an idea of messianic salvation is spelled out in many different discourses —aesthetic, political, socio-philosophical, historico-philosophical. The close connection of truth and *Darstellung* to salvation can be seen in the way objective truth is understood within the framework of the "name" which, as we have already seen, means the linguistic shape of the creation that lives on, deeply submerged in every being. As the hidden heart of all things, the divine name which is sunk within every being secretly embodies the small power hidden in meaning to rise up against the oppressing forces of history, politics and society. "For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter",<sup>221</sup> as the famous last line of the Theses on the Philosophy of History puts it. Even if the past and current state of the world seem irredeemable, and a revolution that would end the permanent violence and injustice seems, for many reasons, unthinkable —nevertheless there remain hidden traces of messianic power even in the smallest of things, and every "presence of the now" contains the possibility of grasping truth and seizing the moment, by fulfilling the messianic responsibility of absolute justice and freedom. "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule."<sup>222</sup> Even Benjamin's most theoretical philosophy, in its idea of a damaged yet powerful truth, is scarred by the concrete, historical knowledge of the circumstances of a corrupt world. But at the same time, even his most theoretical, most abstract considerations contain traces of the possibility of salvation and of historical, political revolution as moments of the self-fulfilling of truth. In other words, even his most theoretical considerations on truth, knowledge and representation aim at, and encompass, ethical and political principles and possibilities. Benjamin's essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* closes with words that express the paradox as well as the certainty of a revolutionary hope for absolute justice and freedom that operates at the heart of truth and *Darstellung*, and which leaves the one that hopes without the benefits he offers: "Only for the sake of the hopeless have we been given hope."

Benjamin's closeness to Hegel in some of his most important figures of thought—at least when it comes to epistemology and ontology—illuminates a certain compatibility of approaches between German Idealism and Early Critical Theory concerning the possibility and necessity of metaphysical ideas and theories, and in so doing demonstrates the various ways in which modernity cannot simply be called a “postmetaphysical” (Habermas) age. Metaphysics, understood as the highly rational and critical philosophical enterprise from Descartes, Leibniz, Kant and Hegel to Benjamin and Adorno, is not only necessary for every science or complex theoretical enterprise, in order to provide a ground and a reliable conceptual framework.<sup>224</sup> Metaphysics is also essential for humans' spiritual as well as practical freedom, particularly in the modern age. Against the discursive confusion, ideological unity, factual inflexibleness, historical lack of alternatives and practical non-interference regarding the rigidly confined spaces of the lifeworld in late capitalism, only a thinking that rationally transgresses what is towards alternative states of being, history, and humanity, and which aims courageously at the understanding of the “whole” beyond the narrow borders of unquestionable givenness, of the empirical detectable and scientifically describable, or even the “natural” in a strictly materialistic sense, can make a difference. To this extent, only metaphysical approaches provide rational authorisation for hope in a higher meaning, a hope which is able to maintain the ethics and norms of a better, more just, more free life, in the sense given by critical theory. “It floods us. We arrange it. It decays./ We arrange it again, and we decay.”<sup>225</sup> Only a strong metaphysical thinking can responsibly handle the overwhelming negativity of being and history, without despair or indifference in the face of the superior strength of the current “facticity”, a facticity which is intellectually, politically, social and economically far removed from the “best of all possible worlds” the metaphysicians dreamed of. Hegel and Benjamin are—willingly or unwillingly, exoterically or esoterically, in different parts and elements of their thinking, and never consistently—both part of a resistance movement against this rotten state of being. And the force within this silent, “expressionless” movement secretly increases again.



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1 Passage taken from the description of the program of the Walter-Benjamin-Chair:  
<http://www.udg.edu/tabid/19982/language/ca-ES/Default.aspx>.

[2](#) Plato, Phaed. 276a (Transl. Harold N. Fowler).

[3](#) Hegel-research as well as Benjamin-research have reached such an enormous extent and such a high specialisation both in meticulous problem-finding and analysis, one should in the context of such a text not even try to be comprehensive or sufficient regarding sources, references and further discussions of the mentioned areas of Benjamin and Hegel in research, in order not to exceed the capacity of this small book. Therefore, I skip this part almost completely. Most of the given references come from German-language research. I often refer to some of my own texts in order to document my constant occupation with this subject, and more importantly, because I can not explicate some important arguments, which I have developed elsewhere, in the context of this book.



[4](#) The correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940. Ed. and annotated by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno. Trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press 1994 (subsequently abbreviated as “CR”), p. 496f. I will also refer to the German original in footnotes. Here: Walter Benjamin, Briefe. 2 vol. Ed. and annotated by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1978 (subsequently abbreviated as “BR”). Here: vol. 2, p. 674.

[5](#) Theodor W. Adorno, *Vermischte Schriften I*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1986 (=Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 20.1), p. 403. Unless otherwise noted, my translation.

[6](#) If something propositional or conceptual is self-referential in this narrow meaning, it is what it predicates; if something propositional or conceptual is self-relational, it predicates what it is. The problem of self-referentiality goes back to Plato's ontology of ideas and the (onto) logical problems which derive from their absoluteness regarding themselves (e.g. the idea of beauty as being itself beautiful); see e.g. Plato, *Symp.*, 211a 2-5, and Benedikt Strobel, "Idee/ Ideenkritik/ Dritter Mensch" in *Platon-Handbuch*. Ed. by Christoph Horn, Jörn Müller and Joachim Söder. Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler 2009, pp. 289-297, here p. 290f. Regarding the difference between self-referential and self-relational, see Vittorio Hösle, *Hegels System. Der Idealismus der Subjektivität und das Problem der Intersubjektivität*. Hamburg: Meiner 1998, pp. 72-74.



[7](#) See Axel Honneth's distinction between a "weak" and a "strong" form of social critique, "Rekonstruktive Gesellschaftskritik unter genealogischem Vorbehalt. Zur Idee der 'Kritik' in der Frankfurter Schule" in *Pathologien der Vernunft. Geschichte und Gegenwart der Kritischen Theorie*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2007, pp. 57-70, here p. 57f.

[8](#) Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*. Trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. London: NLB 1979, p. 89 (“This space for rent”). Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*. “Unter Mitwirkung von Theodor W. Adorno und Gershom Scholem hg. von Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser.” 7 vol. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1991 (subsequently abbreviated as “GS”). Here: GS IV.1, 131 (“Diese Flächen sind zu vermieten”): “Narren, die den Verfall der Kritik beklagen. Denn deren Stunde ist längst abgelaufen. Kritik ist eine Sache des rechten Abstands. Sie ist in einer Welt zu Hause, wo es auf Perspektiven und Prospekte ankommt und einen Standpunkt einzunehmen noch möglich war.”

[9](#) Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*. Reflections on a damaged life. Trans. by E.F.N. Jephcott. London, New York: Verso 2005, p. 26 (“Antithesis”). Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2003 (=Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 4), p. 28: “Für den, der nicht mitmacht, besteht die Gefahr, daß er sich für besser hält als die andern und seine Kritik der Gesellschaft mißbraucht als Ideologie für sein privates Interesse. Während er danach tastet, die eigene Existenz zum hinfälligen Bilde einer richtigen zu machen, sollte er dieser Hinfälligkeit eingedenk bleiben und wissen, wie wenig das Bild das richtige Leben ersetzt. Solchem Eingedenken aber widerstrebt die Schwerkraft des Bürgerlichen in ihm selber. Der Distanzierte bleibt so verstrickt wie der Betriebsame; vor diesem hat er nichts voraus als die Einsicht in seine Verstricktheit und das Glück der winzigen Freiheit, die im Erkennen als solchem liegt. Die eigene Distanz vom Betrieb ist ein Luxus, den einzig der Betrieb abwirft. Darum trägt gerade jede Regung des sich Entziehens Züge des Negierten.”



[10](#) Adorno, *Minima Moralia*. Reflections on a damaged life, p. 39. “[D]ie Antithesis ist schon in dem Augenblick, in dem man sie ausspricht, eine Ideologie für die, welche mit schlechtem Gewissen das Ihre behalten wollen. Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen.” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben, p. 43) The cited translation of this last, (in)famous sentence is highly problematical, because it ignores the even more passive construction and the extinction of every trace of subjectivity in the original. A better translation would be: “There is no right life within the wrong one.”

[11](#) See Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin – die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1975, p. 102.

[12](#) For a concise discussion, see, eg. Holm Tetens, *Gott denken. Ein Versuch über rationale Theologie*, Stuttgart: Reclam 2015, pp. 16-21.



[13](#) Aristotle, Met. 1017a 23; see also Aristotle, Phys. 227b 5.

[14](#) Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell 2001, p. 70 [§ 9]. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Niemeyer 182001, p. 44 [§ 9]: “Das je schon vorgängige Ansprechen des Seins im Besprechen (λογος) des Seienden ist das κατηγορεισθαι.”

[15](#) Plato, *Soph.*, 253b-255e.



[16](#) Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason (Kritik der reinen Vernunft), B 103-107.

[17](#) Gershom Scholem, “Walter Benjamin” in *Über Walter Benjamin*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1968, pp. 132-165, here p. 138f.

[18](#) Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments. Ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Trans. by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press 2002, p. xi. Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2003 (=Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 3), p. 9: “[eine] Theorie, welche der Wahrheit einen Zeitkern zuspricht, anstatt sie als Unveränderliches der geschichtlichen Bewegung entgegensetzen.” On Benjamin’s use of the tradition of the theory of categories, especially in relation to Kant and Husserl, see Jan Urbich, “Die Kategorienlehre Walter Benjamins in der ‘Erkenntniskritischen Vorrede’. Prinzipien und Beziehungen” in Kategorien zwischen Denkform, Analysewerkzeug und historischem Diskurs. Ed. by Elisabeth Fritz et. al. Heidelberg: Winter 2012, pp. 51-69.



[19](#) See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. by John Osborne. London, New York: Verso 2003 (subsequently abbreviated as “OR”), p. 44, 49. GS I.1, 224, 230. See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*. Trans. and ed. by George Di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press 2010, pp. 16-19, 24f., 27-30. G.W.F.Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik I*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1986 (=Werke, vol. 5), pp. 26-29, 36f., 41-45.

[20](#) See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London, New York: Routledge 2002, pp. xxi-xxv. Michel Foucault, *Die Ordnung der Dinge. Eine Archäologie der Humanwissenschaften*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1971, pp. 22-24.

[21](#) It is very complicated to determine the full epistemological status and functionality of the basic terms in the Prologue, terms such as “idea”, “notion”, “phenomenon”, “element”, “origin”, “monad”, “truth”, “cognition” or “representation”. These terms are not fixed categories in a classical sense of the word, such as “quality” or “quantity” in Aristotle’s *On categories* or “cause” and “effect” in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Moreover, these terms are primarily metacategorical: with them, categorical concepts of phenomena can be composed or determined. The Prologue gives a doctrine of the heuristics of finding categorical formations: i.e. of finding the “idea” of a range of phenomena by constructing their basic terms through determination of their origin, representation etc. See Urbich, “Die Kategorienlehre Walter Benjamins”, pp. 64-68.

[22](#) This phrase comes from Friedrich Schiller (“die Zeit in der Zeit aufzuheben”), who used it to grasp how aesthetic beauty, as a special mode of shaping time, overcomes certain limiting temporal determinations; see Friedrich Schiller, “Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen” in *Theoretische Schriften*. Ed. by Rolf-Peter Janz. Frankfurt/M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag 1992, pp. 556-677, here p. 607 (XIV. Letter).



[23](#) “Origin” in Benjamin’s understanding refers to the infinite updatability (Aktualisierbarkeit) of real “ideas”, and therefore to the special way in which historicity and eternity are combined within the concept of “idea”. See Hans Heinz Holz, “Prismatisches Denken” in *Über Walter Benjamin*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1968, pp. 62-111, here p. 96f. About the concept of “origin” in Benjamin’s thinking, see Jan Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin. Die “Erkenntniskritische Vorrede” im Kontext ästhetischer Darstellungstheorien der Moderne*. Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter 2012, pp. 223-294.

[24](#) For an accurate description of Benjamin's style of writing and its strategic as well as philosophical implications, see Bernd Witte, "Allegorien des Schreibens. Eine Lektüre von Walter Benjamins Trauerspielbuch", *Merkur* 46 (1992), pp. 125-136.

[25](#) As a role model for this kind of analysis in the field of German Critical Theory, Rolf Wiggershaus has shown how Adorno and Wittgenstein are intellectually closely connected: Rolf Wiggershaus, Wittgenstein und Adorno. Zwei Spielarten modernen Philosophierens. Göttingen: Wallstein 2001.

[26](#) Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. Trans. by Joel Weisheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London, New York: Continuum 2004, p. 278. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Tübingen: Mohr 1990 (=Gesammelte Werke, vol. 1), p. 281: “In Wahrheit gehört die Geschichte nicht uns, sondern wir gehören ihr. Lange bevor wir uns in der Rückbesinnung selber verstehen, verstehen wir uns auf selbstverständliche Weise im Familie, Gesellschaft und Staat, in denen wir leben. Der Fokus der Subjektivität ist ein Zerrspiegel. Die Selbstbesinnung des Individuums ist nur ein Flackern im geschlossenen Stromkreis des geschichtlichen Lebens. Darum sind die Vorurteile des einzelnen weit mehr als seine Urteile die geschichtliche Wirklichkeit seines Seins.” On Hermeneutics as a philosophy of the productive limitations of reason, see Günter Figal, “Die Komplexität philosophischer Hermeneutik” in *Der Sinn des Verstehens. Beiträge zur hermeneutischen Philosophie*. Stuttgart: Reclam 1996, pp. 11-32.



[27](#) See Dieter Henrich, *Konstellationen. Probleme und Debatten am Ursprung der idealistischen Philosophie (1789-1795)*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 1991.

[28](#) See Marcelo Stamm, “Konstellationsforschung – Ein Methodenprofil: Motive und Perspektiven” in *Konstellationsforschung*. Ed. by Martin Mulsow and Marcelo Stamm. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2005, pp. 31-74, here p. 33.

[29](#) See Wolfgang Beierwaltes, *Platonismus und Idealismus*. Tübingen: Klostermann 22004.

[30](#) Michel Foucault, *The Order of Discourse in Untying the Text. A Post-Structuralist Reader*. Ed. by Robert Young. Boston, London: Routledge 1981, pp. 48-79, here p. 74. “Aber um Hegel wirklich zu entrinnen, muß man ermessen, was es kostet, sich von ihm loszusagen; muß man wissen, wie weit uns Hegel insgeheim vielleicht nachgeschlichen ist; und was in unserem Denken gegen Hegel vielleicht noch von Hegel stammt; muß man ermessen, inwieweit auch noch unser Anrennen gegen ihn seine List ist, hinter der er uns auflauert: unbeweglich und anderswo.” (Michel Foucault, *Die Ordnung des Diskurses*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2001, p. 45) See also Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 339 (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 349).



[31](#) Adorno, *Minima Moralia*. Reflections on a damaged life, p. 88f. (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben, p. 99f.).

[32](#) cited in: GS II.3, 836f.

[33](#) Wolfgang Welsch has given a tremendous account of how Analytic Philosophy, with its Neo-Kantian roots, overcame its general refusal of Hegel. See his “Hegel und die analytische Philosophie. Über einige Kongruenzen in Grundfragen der Philosophie” in *Antrittsvorlesungen der Philosophischen Fakultät Jena*. vol. VI. Jena: Friedrich-Schiller-Universität 2005, pp. 139-229.

[34](#) See Michel Palmier, Walter Benjamin, Lumpensammler, Engel und bucklicht Männlein. Ästhetik und Politik bei Walter Benjamin. Ed. by Florent Perrier. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2009, pp. 420-430.



[35](#) Georg Lukács, Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein. Studien über marxistische Dialektik. Neuwied und Berlin: Luchterhand 1970, p. 56.

[36](#) Ernst Bloch, “Marxistische Propädeutik und nochmals das Studium” in Philosophische Aufsätze zur objektiven Phantasie. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1985 (=Werkausgabe, vol. 10), pp. 255-270, here p. 259.

[37](#) Cited in: II.3, 1175.

[38](#) For some of them, see Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 32-49.



[39](#) Fred Rush, “Jena romanticism and Benjamin’s critical epistemology” in Walter Benjamin. *Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*. 3 vol. Ed. by Peter Osborne. vol. 1. London, New York: Routledge 2005, pp. 63-82, here p. 64.

[40](#) See Manfred Frank, “Unendliche Annäherung”. Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1997, and Jan Urbich, “‘Mysterium der Ordnung’. Anmerkungen zum Verhältnis von Absolutem und Sprache bei Friedrich Schlegel und Walter Benjamin”, Sprache und Literatur 1 (2009), pp. 93-111.

[41](#) See Palmier, Walter Benjamin; Eli Friedlander, Walter Benjamin. A philosophical portrait. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press 2012.

[42](#) See Heinz Schlaffer, “Denkbilder. Eine kleine Prosaform zwischen Dichtung und Gesellschaftstheorie” in *Poesie und Politik. Zur Situation der Literatur in Deutschland*. Ed. by Wolfgang Kutteneuler. Stuttgart, Berlin, Köln, Mainz: Kohlhammer 1973, pp. 137-154.



[43](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. by A. V. Miller. Oxford, New York: Oxford Univ. Press 1977, p. 43. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1989 (=Werke, vol. 3), p. 65.

[44](#) G.W.F. Hegel, “Aphorismen aus Hegels Wastebook” in *Jenaer Schriften 1801–1807*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1986 (=Werke, vol. 2), pp. 540-581, here p. 562. Despite his widespread use of the term “image” —e.g. in “dialectical image”— Benjamin’s philosophy shares with Hegel’s a certain iconoclasm. See OR, 35f. (GS I.1, p. 215f.), Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 206-215, and Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that remains. A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. Trans. by Patricia Dailey. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press 2005, p. 141f. Giorgio Agamben, *Die Zeit, die bleibt. Ein Kommentar zum Römerbrief*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2006, p. 158f.

[45](#) On the relation between Benjamin and Husserl, whom he read intensively, see Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, p. 126f.

[46](#) Scholem, “Walter Benjamin”, p. 138f.

[47](#) Scholem, “Walter Benjamin”, p. 149.



[48](#) Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism. The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” in *Selected Writings*. Vol. 2, part 1: 1927-1930. Ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith. London: Harvard Univ. Press 2005, pp. 207-222, here p. 209. GS II.1, 297.

[49](#) See Willi Bolle, “Geschichte” in *Benjamins Begriffe*. Ed. by Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla. vol 1. Frankfurt/ M.: Suhrkamp 2000, pp. 399-442.

[50](#) Adorno to Benjamin, 6. September 1936: “Denn alle die Punkte, in denen ich, bei der prinzipiellsten und konkretesten Übereinstimmung sonst, von Ihnen differiere, ließen sich zusammenstellen unter dem Titel eines anthropologischen Materialismus, dem ich die Gefolgschaft nicht leisten kann. Es ist, als sei für Sie das Maß der Konkretion der Leib des Menschen.” (GS VII.2, 864)

[51](#) Benjamin's theory of "Gestalt" is hidden in the fragments of GS VI, 7-213. But it is prefigured in many of his published works, such as the essay on the "The Storyteller" or on Surrealism: a text which develops the important distinction between "body-space" ("Leibraum") and "image-space" ("Bildraum"; GS II.1, 310) as a conceptual matrix for the theory of "Gestalt".

[52](#) See Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller. Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov” in *Illuminations*. Ed. by Hannah Arendt. Trans. by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books 1969, pp. 83-111. GS II.2, 438-465.



[53](#) On the logical structure of the “concrete”, see e.g. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic* (with the *Zusätze*). Part I of the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*. Trans. by T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting and H.S. Harris. Indianapolis: Hackett 1991, p. 131f. (§ 82); G.W.F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse I* [1830]. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1986 (=Werke, vol. 8), p. 177 (§ 82).

[54](#) “A person must translate his freedom into an external sphere in order to exist as Idea. [...] The rationale of property is to be found not in the satisfaction of needs but in the supersession of the pure subjectivity of personality. In his property a person exists for the first time as reason.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*. Ed. by Stephen Houlgate. Translated by T.M. Knox. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press 2008, p. 57f. (§ 41). “Die Person muß sich eine äußere Sphäre ihrer Freiheit geben, um als Idee zu sein. [...] Das Vernünftige des Eigentums liegt nicht in der Befriedigung der Bedürfnisse, sondern darin, daß sich die bloße Subjektivität der Persönlichkeit aufhebt. Erst im Eigentume ist die Person als Vernunft.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse*. Ed. by Bernhard Lakebrink. Stuttgart: Reclam 2002, p. 123f. [§ 41].

[55](#) “World history is the expression of the divine and absolute process of the spirit in its highest forms, of the progression whereby it discovers its true nature and and becomes conscious of itself.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. Introduction: Reason in History. Trans. by H.B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press 1975, p. 65.

[56](#) See especially the seventh “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, which can be regarded as the exact opposite of Hegel’s view of history: Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 256f. GS I.2, 696f.

[57](#) Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. Trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin MacLaughlin. London: Harvard Univ. Press 1999 (=subsequently abbreviated as “AP”), p. 473 [N9,4]. GS V.1, 591.



[58](#) See Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 133-147, 176-204 (on Benjamin's Plato reception), pp. 294-308 (on Benjamin's Leibniz reception).

[59](#) Regarding Benjamin's (so to speak) exoteric, explicit intention with the Prologue —to give a methodological justification of his approach to baroque literature— see Heinz Schlaffer, "Walter Benjamins Idee der Gattung" in *Textsorten und literarische Gattungen. Dokumentation des Germanistentages in Hamburg 1979*. Ed. by the "Vorstand der Vereinigung der deutschen Hochschulgermanisten". Berlin 1983, pp. 281-293, and John Pizer, "History, genre und 'Ursprung' in Benjamin's early aesthetics", *German Quarterly* 60 (1987), pp. 68-87.

[60](#) Diametrically opposite to this idea of philosophy as the recognition of time-honoured basic concepts passed on to the present age, Deleuze and Guattari consider philosophy as “the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts” (Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* Trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia Press 1994, p. 2).

[61](#) See Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 32-49.

[62](#) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 492. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 590.



[63](#) “The one philosophy is the philosophia perennis, around which all other philosophies revolve, and which nobody possesses, but in which everybode participates, and which can never gain the form of a universally valid, true intellectual edifice.” – “Die eine Philosophie ist die philosophia perennis, um die alle Philosophien kreisen, und die niemand besitzt, an der jeder eigentlich Philosophierende teilhat, und die doch nie die Gestalt eines für alle gültigen, allein wahren Denkgebäudes gewinnen kann.” (Karl Jaspers, “Philosophie und Wissenschaft” in Über Bedingungen und Möglichkeiten eines neuen Humanismus. Stuttgart: Reclam 1962, pp. 3-21, here p. 17)

[64](#) Martin Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism’”, trans. by Frank A. Capuzzi in *Pathmarks*. Ed. by William McNeill. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press 1998, pp. 239-276, here p. 275. Martin Heidegger, ‘Brief über den “Humanismus”’ in *Wegmarken*. Frankfurt/M.: Klostermann 1976, pp. 313-364, here p. 363.

[65](#) Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. A Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press 1981, p. 54.

[66](#) Both quotations from: Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Third Edition. Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press 1996, p. 175.

[67](#) Helmuth Plessner, “Untersuchungen zu einer Kritik der philosophischen Urteilskraft” in *Frühe philosophische Schriften*. vol. 2. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2003, pp. 7-323, here p. 216.



[68](#) According to Agamben, this is already the main idea in Marx's theory of "classes"; see Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, pp. 29-33; Agamben, *Die Zeit, die bleibt*, pp. 40-44.

[69](#) Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations*, pp. 253-265 (GS I.2, 691-704). On this strongly Jewish idea of salvation as abandonment of history, see Gershom Scholem, “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*. Trans. by Michael A. Meyer. New York: Schocken Books 1995, pp. 1-37. Gershom Scholem, “Zum Verständnis der messianischen Idee im Judentum” in *Über einige Grundbegriffe des Judentums*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp 1970, pp. 121-170.

[70](#) On Benjamin's idea of the "dialectical image", see Palmier, *Walter Benjamin*, pp. 733-748; Ansgar Hillach, "Dialektisches Bild" in *Benjamins Begriffe*, vol. 1, pp. 186-230; Max Pensky, "Method and Time: Benjamin's Dialectical Images" in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. Ed. by David S. Ferris. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press 2004, pp. 177-199.

[71](#) Walter Benjamin, “Goethe’s Elective Affinities” in *Selected Writings*. Vol 1: 1913-1926. Ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. London: Harvard Univ. Press 2002, pp. 297-360, here p. 297f. (GS I.1, 125f.) For an extensive discussion of this very difficult essay, see Benjamins *Wahlverwandtschaften. Zur Kritik einer programmatischen Interpretation*. Ed. by Helmut Hühn, Jan Urbich and Uwe Steiner. Berlin: Suhrkamp 2015.

[72](#) Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*. Trans. and ed. by Thomas Pfau. New York: State Univ. of New York Press 1988, p. 143f. Friedrich Hölderlin, *Theoretische Schriften*. Ed. by Johann Kreuzer. Hamburg: Meiner 1998, p. 44.

[73](#) Hölderlin, Theoretische Schriften, p. 113.



[74](#) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 297; Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 302.

[75](#) Plato, Soph. 226c-d.

[76](#) On Benjamin's notion of "myth", see Winfried Menninghaus, *Schwellenkunde. Walter Benjamins Passage des Mythos*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1986.

[77](#) Benjamin, “Goethe’s Elective Affinities”, p. 325f. („Das Verhältnis von Mythos und Wahrheit [...] ist das der gegenseitigen Ausschließung“, GS I.1, 162).

[78](#) See Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 150-158.

[79](#) See Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, p. 128f. [§ 81]; Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I*, p. 172f. At this point in the *Logic*, Hegel has not yet developed the differences between difference/distinction, opposition, contradiction etc. (Verschiedenheit, Unterschied, Gegensatz, Widerspruch), therefore the general term “opposition” (Entgegensetzung) stands for the unity of this negative relation.



[80](#) Hegel's whole concept of dialectics in the "Logic of Essence" is developed from the idea that the notion of a "self-negating negation" serves as the very opposite of seemingly increased nothingness: on the contrary, it allows all necessary determinations of truthful Essences to emerge from themselves and stabilize. See Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, pp. 337-353. G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik II*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2003 (=Werke, vol. 6), pp. 17-35.

[81](#) See Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, pp. 131-133 [§ 82]; Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I*, pp. 176-179.

[82](#) Hegel, Science of Logic, p. 33. Hegel, Wissenschaft der Logik I, p. 49. Concerning the particular content, structure and functionality of Benjamin's idea of "critique", see f.e. Helmut Hühn, Jan Urbich, "Benjamins 'Wahlverwandtschaften'-Essay" in Benjamins Wahlverwandtschaften, pp. 9-37, here p. 25, and Jan Urbich, "Das Ausdruckslose. Benjamins Dialektik des Scheins" in Benjamins Wahlverwandtschaften, pp. 90-128, here pp. 105-111 (further bibliographical references to this key subject in Benjamin research can be found there).

[83](#) Hegel, Science of Logic, p. 33. Hegel, Wissenschaft der Logik I, p. 49.

[84](#) Hegel, The Encyclopaedia Logic, p. 131 [§ 82, Addition 2]; Hegel, Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I, p. 176.

[85](#) Hegel, Science of Logic, p. 33. Hegel, Wissenschaft der Logik I, p. 49.



[86](#) See Hegel, *Science of Logic*, pp. 59-80; Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik I*, pp. 82-112, esp. p. 104f.

[87](#) Hegel, Science of Logic, p. 33. Hegel, Wissenschaft der Logik I, p. 49.

[88](#) See Adorno's Hegel: Three Studies (Theodor W. Adorno, Drei Studien zu Hegel in Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie. Drei Studien zu Hegel. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp 2003 [=Werke, vol. 5], pp. 247-380).

[89](#) G.W.F. Hegel, Lectures on the History of Philosophy. Trans. by E.S. Haldane. vol. I. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner 1892, p. 264. “Das Falsche muß nicht darum als falsch dargetan werden, weil das Entgegengesetzte wahr ist, sondern an ihm selbst.” (G.W.F. Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie I, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1971 [= Werke, vol. 18], p. 302)

[90](#) “Something is sublated only in so far as it has entered into unity with its opposite; in this closer determination as something reflected, it may fittingly be called a moment.” (Hegel, Science of Logic, p. 82) “Etwas ist nur insofern aufgehoben, als es in die Einheit mit seinem Entgegengesetzten getreten ist; in dieser näheren Bestimmung als ein Reflektiertes kann es passend Moment genannt werden.” (Hegel, Wissenschaft der Logik I, p. 114)

[91](#) Hegel, The Encyclopaedia Logic, p. 128 (§ 81); Hegel, Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I, p. 172.



[92](#) See Benjamin's analogous metaphor of an "awakening" as the inner critical force in historical institutions and substances that aims at a better unfolding of what is contained in their historically distorted form.

[93](#) Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, p. 33f. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik I*, p. 50f.

[94](#) Walter Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism” in *Selected Writings*. Vol 1: 1913-1926, pp. 116-200, here p. 132f. GS I.1, 36f.

[95](#) Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism”, p. 143. GS I.1, 53.

[96](#) On Schlegel and Benjamin, the romantic idea and Benjamin's idea of critique, see Jan Urbich, "'Mysterium der Ordnung'. Anmerkungen zum Verhältnis von Absolutem und Sprache bei Friedrich Schlegel und Walter Benjamin", *Sprache und Literatur* 1 (2009), pp. 93-111. "Die Kunst geht auf den letzten Messias. Friedrich Schlegels 'Ideen' —Fragmente und das Verhältnis von Revolution und Religion" in *Romantik und Revolution. Zum politischen Reformpotential einer unpolitischen Bewegung*. Ed. by. Klaus Ries. Heidelberg: Winter 2012, pp. 171-195. "Darstellung und Reflexion. Zu Friedrich Schlegel und Walter Benjamin" in *Darstellung und Erkenntnis. Beiträge zur Rolle nichtpropositionaler Erkenntnisformen in der deutschen Philosophie und Literatur nach Kant*. Ed. by Brady Bowman. Paderborn: Mentis 2007, pp. 211-229. "Das Ausdruckslose. Zur Dialektik des Scheins bei Benjamin", esp. pp. 104-111.

[97](#) Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism”, p. 144f. GS I.1, 54f.

[98](#) Hegel, Science of Logic, p. 78. Hegel, Wissenschaft der Logik I, p. 108.



[99](#) Hegel, Science of Logic, p. 345. Hegel, Wissenschaft der Logik II, p. 24.

[100](#) Walter Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment” in *Reflections*. Trans. by Edmund Jephcott and ed. by Peter Demetz. New York: Schocken Books, p. 312f.

[101](#) Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment”, p. 312. GS II.1, 203.

[102](#) See Aristotle, Met. 1048a 25, Phys. 191b 28.

[103](#) Concerning the closeness to Schlegel's idea of salvation, see Jan Urbich, "Die Kunst geht auf den letzten Messias".

[104](#) Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, p. 254. GS I.2, 694.

[105](#) Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment”, p. 313. GS II.1, 204.



[106](#) Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment”, p. 312. GS II.1, 203f.

[107](#) Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, p. 254. GS I.2, 693.

[108](#) Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment”, p. 312. GS II.1, 204.

[109](#) Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment”, p. 312f. GS II.1, 204. Concerning Benjamin’s conception of happiness, see the second of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and Tilo Wesche, “Glück in Benjamins ‘Wahlverwandtschaften’-Essay” in Benjamins Wahlverwandtschaften, pp. 195-221.

[110](#) Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment”, p. 313. GS II.1, 204.

[111](#) Peter Szondi, *Hegels Lehre von der Dichtung in Poetik und Geschichtsphilosophie I*. Ed. by Senta Metz and Hans-Hagen Hildebrandt. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1976 (=Studienausgabe der Vorlesungen, vol. 2), pp. 267-513, here p. 407. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*. Trans. by T.M. Knox. vol. I. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press 1988, p. 485: “The blessed gods mourn as it were over their blessedness or their bodily form.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik II*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1986 (=Werke, vol. 14), p. 86.

[112](#) Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, p. 255. GS I.2, 694f.



[113](#) Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. Trans. by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness. London, New York: Routledge Classics 2001, p. 86 (6.4.1). Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. Philosophische Untersuchungen. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1999 (=Werkausgabe, vol. 1), p. 82f.

[114](#) Adorno, *Minima Moralia*. *Reflections on a damaged Life*, p. 247. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*. *Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*, p. 283.

[115](#) See Welsch, “Hegel und die analytische Philosophie”.

[116](#) See primarily Quine’s “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” and Sellars’ “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”.

[117](#) Bertrand Russell, “Hegel and Common Sense” in *Logical and Philosophical Papers 1909-1913*. London, New York: Routledge Classics 1992, p. 364f., here p. 365.

[118](#) See Welsch, “Hegel und die analytische Philosophie”, p. 184f.

[119](#) On Benjamin and Kant, see Peter Fenves, “Kant in Benjamins ‘Wahlverwandtschaften’-Essay” in Benjamins Wahlverwandtschaften, pp. 221-238.



[120](#) See Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre*. Ed. by Reinhard Lauth and Hans Gliwicky. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog 1970 (=Werke, vol. 4), p. 231f., and G.W.F. Hegel, “Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie (1801)” in *Jenaer Schriften*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp 1986 (=Werke, vol. 2), pp. 9-141, here p. 9f.

[121](#) Walter Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy” in *Selected Writings*. Vol 1: 1913-1926, pp. 100-110, here p. 100. GS II.1, 157.

[122](#) Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”, p. 102. GS II.1, 159.

[123](#) Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”, p. 105. GS II.1, 164.

[124](#) Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”, p. 100. GS II.1, 158.

[125](#) Hegel, “Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie”, pp. 20-25.

[126](#) Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”, p. 101. GS II.1, 159.

[127](#) See Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, pp. 80-107 (§40-§60); Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I*, pp. 112-148.



[128](#) See Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, p. 52, 126f.

[129](#) Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”, p. 102. GS II.1, 160.

[130](#) Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”, p. 102. GS II.1, 160.

[131](#) Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”, p. 103. GS II.1, 161.

[132](#) Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p. 83 (§41); Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I*, p. 113.

[133](#) Hegel, The Encyclopaedia Logic, p. 101 (§52); Hegel, Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I, p. 137.

[134](#) Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”, p. 104. GS II.1, 163.

[135](#) Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”, p. 104. GS II.1, 163.



[136](#) See Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p. 303f. (§ 237); Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I*, p. 388f.

[137](#) Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”, p. 105. GS II.1, 164.

[138](#) Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”, p. 107. GS II.1, 167.

[139](#) For a first attempt at such a commentary, see Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 20-350.

[140](#) Cited in George Steiner, “To Speak of Walter Benjamin”, *Benjamin-Studies* 1 (2002), pp. 11-25, here p. 15.

[141](#) See GS I.3, 868-915, and Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 29-32.

[142](#) See Lecture 1, and Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 225-230.

[143](#) Concerning Benjamin's use of Leibniz' term "monad" and further bibliographical references, see Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 294-308.



[144](#) On Simmel and Benjamin, see Hühn, Urbich, “Benjamins ‘Wahlverwandtschaften’-Essay”, pp. 12-14.

[145](#) Georg Simmel, “Selbstanzeige zur Philosophie des Geldes” in *Philosophie des Geldes*. Ed. by David P. Frisby and Klaus Christian Köhnke. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1989, pp. 719-725, here p. 719. See Palmier, Walter Benjamin, pp. 719-725. Before, John Locke uses this metaphor at the start of his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (Book I, Chapter CVII, 15). I am grateful to Adrian Wilding for this information.

[146](#) On Leibniz' idea of monads as singular representations of the whole in relation to Benjamin, see Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 298-300.

[147](#) See Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 29-32.

[148](#) On further research about the concept of “Darstellung”, see Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*; Martha B. Helfer, *The Retreat of Representation. The Concept of Darstellung in German Critical Discourse*. New York: State Univ. of New York Press 1996; Inka Mülder-Bach, *Im Zeichen Pygmalions: das Modell der Statue und die Entdeckung der “Darstellung” im 18. Jahrhundert*. München: Fink 1998; David E. Wellbery, *Lessing’s “Laocoon”: Aesthetics and Semiotics in the Age of Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press 1984. Was heißt “Darstellen”? Ed. by Christiaan L. Hart Nibbrig. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1994.

[149](#) On the history of the “classical” concept of representation and the idea of its “crisis”, see Foucault, *The Order of Things*, pp. 51-86, 235-272 (Foucault, *Die Ordnung der Dinge*, pp. 78-113, 269-306); and Hans Jörg Sandkühler, *Kritik der Repräsentation. Einführung in die Theorie der Überzeugungen, der Wissenskulturen und des Wissens*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2009.

[150](#) The major differences both in description and evaluation between Plato's and Aristotle's concept of Mimesis are not discussed here. Both agree about the idea of representation as signifying repetition of a prior, exterior-to-representation, in itself representationless being: whether it is a subjective imagination in the soul (that could itself, by a shift of perspective, be seen as a "natural" representation of something exterior), an objective idea or an actual material being); they disagree about the epistemological and ethical value of mimesis as representation, and whether mimesis is able to access the essence of the being represented at all. On Aristotle's view of the general logic of representation by signification, see in particular Aristotle, *De interpret.* 16a3-8.

[151](#) Hegel could have integrated this Platonic critique of representation very well in his model of what he calls “seinslogisches Denken” (“thinking according to the norm of being”) and therefore allocate a historical place to it as belonging to the lowest level of metaphysics. According to Hegel’s “Doctrine of Being”, philosophy would secretly act by the laws of imagination (Vorstellung) and therefore reify all subject matter or all beings as immediate (unmittelbares) “Vorausseiendes” (“something given in advance”; Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p. 82 [§ 41, Add. 1]; Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I*, p. 114) which stand externally against each other as well as against representation—even if representation is at the same time meant to grasp the “essence” of its subjects. The fundamental logical structure of the “Doctrine of Being” is that their subject matters are “others vis-à-vis each other, and their further determination [...] is a passing-over into another.” (Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p. 135 [§ 84]; Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I*, p. 181). This logical externality shapes fundamental conflicts and problems in the theory of representation and cognition, which Hegel also develops in the “Introduction” of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* through the critique on the Kantian idea of cognition as an “instrument” or a “medium”; a characterization that Benjamin takes up in the Prologue (see Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 56-59). Benjamin’s shift from “representation” to “Darstellung” matches the Hegelian transition from a “Doctrine of Being” to a “Doctrine of Essence” by changing the structure of the subject matter and its relation to the modes and functions of representation and cognition.



[152](#) Descartes already notices the transformation of objects into the code of the “being representing” when becoming represented: that’s what he calls “objectivity”. Therefore, he argues against a critical response to his “theory of mind” in the *Meditationes*: “He [Caterus, J.U.] is referring to the thing itself as if it were located outside the intellect, and in this sense ‘objective being in the intellect’ is certainly an extraneous label; but I was speaking of the idea, which is never outside the intellect, and in this sense ‘objective being’ simply means being in the intellect in the way in which objects are normally there.” (René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy. With Selections from the Objections and Replies. Revised Edition.* Trans. and ed. by John Cottingham. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press 1996, p. 85; *Ideen. Repräsentationalismus in der Frühen Neuzeit.* 2 vol. vol 1: *Texte.* Ed. by Dominik Perler and Johannes Haag. Berlin, New York: de Gruyter 2010, p. 74). The problem, of course, is then to demonstrate how this “objective being” of subject matter in the language of the representing mind and its instruments corresponds to the “formal being” of their essence outside the codes and patterns of representation.

[153](#) The well-known expression “*individuum est ineffabile*”, which goes back to Plato and Aristotle who in his *Metaphysics* (7, 4) claims that “there can be no theoretical treatment of that which is accidentally.” (Aristotle, *Met.* 6, 2 [1026b]), captures in classical ontology the essence of this “loss” of primarily conceptual representation. According to this argument, the fundamental “gap” between the generality of verbal signs and concepts (genre, type), and the irreducible individuality of concrete subject matters which always partly differ from general patterns under which they are subsumed, cannot be bridged completely. Later on, Leibniz emphasizes that “paradoxical as it may seem, it is impossible for us to know individuals or to find any way of precisely determining the individuality of any thing”, because “individuality involves infinity, and only someone who was capable of grasping the infinite could know the principle of individuation of a given thing. This arises from the influence —properly understood— that all the things in the universe have on one another.” (Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Trans. and ed. by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press 1996, p. 289f. [III, 3, § 6]. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Abhandlungen über den menschlichen Verstand*. Trans. and ed. by Wolf von Engelhardt and Hans Heinz Holz. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2000 [=Philosophische Schriften, vol. 3.2], p. 43) For Leibniz, this results less from the categorical incompatibility of verbal generality and actual individuality, but from the so-to-speak “infinite contextuality” of the singular being: because every individual existence can be determined in an infinite number of relations to and perspectives upon any other being, and that is why such a complete determination is, for finite beings, unachievable. Kant follows this idea in his “principle of thoroughgoing determination” (“*Grundsätze der durchgängigen Bestimmung*”, Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. and ed. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press 1998, p. 553 [B 599]) of every single thing as an actually impossible (although in principle thinkable) way of representing individuality, “according to which, among all possible predicates of things, insofar as they are compared with their opposites, one must apply to it. [...] The proposition ‘Everything existing is thoroughly determined’ signifies not only that of every given pair of opposed predicates, but also of every pair of possible predicates, one of them must always apply to it [...]. What it means is that in order to cognize a thing completely one has to cognize everything possible and determine the thing through it, whether affirmatively or negatively. Thoroughgoing determination is consequently a concept that we can never exhibit in concreto in its totality, and thus it is grounded on an idea which has its seat solely in reason, which prescribes to the understanding the rule of its complete use.” (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 554 [B 600f.]) Although this idea seems to be correct only for contradictory (not for contrary) predicates, what it indicates can be understood after all: to represent an individual being means to limit the infinite number of its determinations to a restricted set of features and therefore to discuss the norms of their selection and combination against the background of the “idea of an All of reality (*omnitude realitatis*)” (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 555 [B 604f.]), in relation to which all cognition is nothing but “true negations” or “limits” to this idea of complete individual determination. But for Kant as well as for Leibniz, the Aristotelian problem also remains, so that the common medium of representation (language and its conceptual potencies) reinforces this logical problem: because “although nothing exists but particular things, the far greatest parts of words are nevertheless general terms” (Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, III, 3, § 1, p. 288; Leibniz, *Abhandlungen über den menschlichen Verstand*, p. 37). Famously, Friedrich Schiller at the end of his “*Kallias-Letters*” to Gottfried Körner laments the nature of language and its opposition to the fundamental aim of poetry, which is “to depict the particular” by “artistic construction of the general” (Friedrich Schiller. “*Kallias or*

[154](#) See Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 401-454.

[155](#) Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness. A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology. Trans. by Hazel E. Barnes. New York, London: Washington Square Press 1992, p. 4.

[156](#) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 135. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 145.

[157](#) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 132. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 142.

[158](#) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 112. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 118.

[159](#) How indefensible such a concept of representation is, Hegel demonstrates in his critique of the “Schein” —together with the reasons for its persistence. See Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, pp. 341-354; Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik II*, pp. 19-24.



[160](#) Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 342. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik II*, p. 20. For this concept of immediacy, an extensive redefinition of the term “immediacy” within the “Doctrine of Essence” is necessary; Dieter Henrich has retraced this potentially problematic move step by step: Dieter Henrich, “Hegels Logik der Reflexion. Neue Fassung” in *Die Wissenschaft der Logik und die Logik der Reflexion*. Ed. by Dieter Henrich. Bonn: Bouvier 1978, pp. 204-328, here pp. 242-252. Wilfried Sellars’ extensive critique of the “myth of the given” (*Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*), a critique of a concept of immediacy that claims to be without any prior mediation, to be seen in contrast to mediation and to be able to fund any mediation in knowledge, owes much to Hegel’s concept of absolute reflexivity. Benjamin belongs firmly in this tradition.

[161](#) At this point, the structure of Darstellung and the transcendental structure of the “I”, in its problematic identity of reflexivity and immediacy, coincide: and perhaps it is not by accident that the early Fichte replaced the term “Darstellung” with the term “I” without changing its content. See Johann Gottlieb Fichte, “Eigene Meditationen über ElementarPhilosophie” in *Nachgelassene Schriften 1793–1795*. Ed. by Reinhard Lauth and Hans Jacob. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog 1971 (=Gesamtausgabe, vol. II.3), pp. 3-181, here p. 89f., and Helfer, *The Retreat of Representation*, pp. 64-67.

[162](#) On a current conclusive, phenomenological theory of approachableness, see John Sallis, *Force of Imagination. The Sense of the Elemental*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press 2000.

[163](#) Benjamin's philosophy of the "expressionless" captures this problem of how something given prior to representation and unreachable by it nevertheless entertains fundamental relations to expressivity and is even presupposed by it. See Jan Urbich, "Das Ausdruckslose. Zur Dialektik des Scheins bei Benjamin".

[164](#) Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, pp. 352-356; Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik II*, pp. 33-38.

[165](#) Compare Willard Van Orman Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” in *From a Logical Point of View. Nine Logico-Philosophical Essays*. New York et. al.: Harper Torchbooks 1980, pp. 20-47, esp. pp. 42-46.

[166](#) See Michael Theunissen, *Sein und Schein. Die kritische Funktion der Hegelschen Logik*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1994, pp. 13-16.

[167](#) Agamben, *The Time that remains*, p. 24. Agamben, *Die Zeit, die bleibt*, p. 35.



[168](#) Agamben, *The Time that remains*, p. 34. Agamben, *Die Zeit, die bleibt*, p. 45. See Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, p. 339f., 499f.

[169](#) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 49. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 72. See on further instances of the use of “Darstellung” in Hegel with further bibliographical references Theunissen, *Sein und Schein*, pp. 23-61.

[170](#) Hegel, Science of Logic, p. 10. Hegel, Wissenschaft der Logik I, p. 17.

[171](#) Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, p. 29. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik I*, p. 43.

[172](#) See Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 147-204; Hans Heinz Holz, “Idee” in *Benjamins Begriffe*, vol. 2, pp. 445-478.

[173](#) The “morphological” tradition of philosophy, of which Benjamin is an important part, thus includes seemingly remote thinkers such as Goethe, Hegel, Wittgenstein and Benjamin. See Joachim Schulte, “Chor und Gesetz. Zur ‘morphologischen Methode’ bei Goethe und Wittgenstein” in *Chor und Gesetz. Wittgenstein im Kontext*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp 1990, pp. 11-34.

[174](#) On Hegel's critique of unmediated immediacy, see e.g. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, pp. 108-125; Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I*, pp. 148-168. On Hegel's redefinition of non-abstract immediacy and the different kinds of immediacy in Hegel, see Henrich, "Hegels Logik der Reflexion".

[175](#) Hegel's critique of Fichte's "I" and its pure fundamental immediacy (which on closer inspection in the research proved to be much more complicated than Hegel's characterisation of it) is shared by Benjamin in his description of the double character of the "idea" (see Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 81-133). Furthermore, both unite in their critique of the "intellectual intuition" ("intellektuelle Anschauung", OR, 35; GS I.1, 215f.) that is central to Fichte's and Schelling's philosophy (see Xavier Tilliette, *Untersuchungen über die intellektuelle Anschauung von Kant bis Hegel*. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: frommann-holzboog 2015); see also Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 87-102, 204-220, 242-257.



[176](#) Hegel, The Encyclopaedia Logic, pp. 108-125 (§ 61-78); Hegel, Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I, pp. 148-168; Hegel, The Science of Logic, pp. 53-55; Hegel, Wissenschaft der Logik I, pp. 76-79.

[177](#) See Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, p. 93f.

[178](#) See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 34-40. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, pp. 54-62. The attack on Hegel by the Early Analytic philosophers (see Welsch, “Hegel und die analytische Philosophie”) and the attempt to defend the atomistic model of truthful propositions was soon reversed in Neurath’s, Quine’s and Sellar’s work.

[179](#) On Hegel's idea of "Darstellung", see Theunissen, *Sein und Schein* (with further bibliographical references on the concept of Darstellung), pp. 61-95; Hans Heinrich Fulda, "Hegels Dialektik als Begriffsbewegung und Darstellungsweise" in *Seminar. Dialektik in der Philosophie Hegels*. Ed. by Rolf-Peter Horstmann. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1978, pp. 124-177; Brady Bowman, "'Werden der Wissenschaft'. Gehalt und methodisches Ideal der Hegelschen Darstellungsform" in *Darstellung und Erkenntnis. Beiträge zur Rolle nichtpropositionaler Erkenntnisformen in der deutschen Philosophie und Literatur nach Kant*. Ed. by Brady Bowman. Paderborn 2007, pp. 271-283.

[180](#) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 34. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 55.

[181](#) Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, p. 38. Hegel, Phänomenologie des Geistes, p. 59.

[182](#) See Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 320-350.

[183](#) See Hegel's constant use of the expression "life of the Notion" or "movement of the Notion"; Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 20, 27, 31. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 38, 46, 51. See also Michael Forster, Claudia Wirsing, "Die Bewegung des Begriffs", *Der blaue Reiter. Journal für Philosophie* 29 (2010), pp. 29-33.



[184](#) See Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 87-102.

[185](#) Hegel, The Encyclopaedia Logic, p. 249 (§ 172); Hegel, Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I, p. 323.

[186](#) Hegel, The Encyclopaedia Logic, p. 249f. (§ 172); Hegel, Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I, p. 323.

[187](#) For one of the most concise and “classical” phrasings of the adaequatio-theory in modernity, see Wittgenstein’s description of truth in the Tractatus: Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (Engl.), p. 11f. (2.19-2.224); Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (Germ.), p. 16f.

[188](#) Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (Engl.), p. 5 (1); Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (Germ.), p. 11.

[189](#) “ac proinde jam videor pro regula generali posse statuere, illud omne esse verum, quod valde clare & distincte percipio.” “So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.” (Descartes, *Meditations*, p. 24 [Third Meditation, 35]) “Demnach scheint es mir möglich, als allgemeine Regel aufzustellen, daß alles das wahr ist, das ich äußerst klar und deutlich erfasse.” (René Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia*. Trans. and ed. by Christian Wohlers. Hamburg: Meiner 2008, pp. 69-71)

[190](#) See Benjamin's reading of Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* at the time he writes the Prologue, and his first contact with Marxism.

[191](#) On Hegel's strongly anti-subjective philosophy of subjectivity, see Christian Iber, *Metaphysik absoluter Relationalität. Eine Studie zu den ersten beiden Kapiteln von Hegels Wesenslogik*. Berlin, New York: de Gruyter 1990, p. 134.



[192](#) “Es ist zu bedenken, daß alles Psychische [...] den Charakter eines mehr oder minder komplexen ‘Bewußtseins von’ hat [...]. [...] Wenn Erkenntnistheorie gleichwohl die Probleme des Verhältnisses von Bewußtsein und Sein erforschen will, so kann sie nur Sein als correlatum von Bewußtsein vor Augen haben, als bewußtseinsmäßig ‘Gemeintes’”. (Edmund Husserl, Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft. [1910/1911] Ed. by Eduard Marbach. Hamburg: Meiner 2009, p. 23, 18)

[193](#) “If a question can be framed at all, it is also possible to answer it.” (Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus [Engl.], p. 88 [6.5]; Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus [Germ.], p. 84)

[194](#) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 54. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 77.

[195](#) Walter Benjamin, “On Language as such and on the Language of Man” in *Selected Writings*. Vol. 1: 1913-1926, pp. 62-74, here p. 62. GS I.1, 142. Benjamin’s reflections on the theological force of language in the essay are far more complicated than represented here; especially the relations between the “mental being”, the “linguistic being”, the “sign”, “meaning” and the “name” remain highly complicated for every interpreter. I reduce this complexity to the basic difference between “in” and “through”.

[196](#) Benjamin, “On Language as such and on the Language of Man”, p. 65. GS I.1, 144.

[197](#) Benjamin, “On Language as such and on the Language of Man”, p. 65f. GS I.1, 145.

[198](#) Benjamin, “On Language as such and on the Language of Man”, p. 67. GS I.1, 147.

[199](#) “Things have no proper names except in God. For in his creative word, God called them into being, calling them by their proper names. In the language of men, however, they are overnamed.” (Benjamin, “On Language as such and on the Language of Man”, p. 73. GS I.1, 155)



[200](#) Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus [Engl.], p. 31 [4.121]; Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus [Germ.], p. 33.

[201](#) On that, see especially Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (1970).

[202](#) Of course, the theological dimensions of the “name” do not get lost completely in the Prologue, but are subordinated to the rationality of Darstellung; in fact, Benjamin tries to integrate the “name” as the “seal” of Darstellung, its linguistic aspect.

[203](#) On how this magical idea of the “name” cannot be equated with an idea of immediate, atomistic, and “intellectual intuition” in language, and how the reflexive implications of the “name” lead to the ideas and concept of the Prologue, see Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 359-366; Urbich, “Mysterium der Ordnung”.

[204](#) On the two aspects of the concept of Darstellung since the 18th century (the epistemological as well as the aesthetical aspect) see Urbich, Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin, pp. 401-477.

[205](#) Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Second Edition. Trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1997, p. 142e [§ 523]. “‘Das Bild sagt mir sich selbst’ — möchte ich sagen. D.h., daß es mir etwas sagt, besteht in seiner eigenen Struktur, in seinen Formen und Farben.” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1999 [=Werkausgabe, vol. 1], S. 438)

[206](#) In more detail on the aesthetic logic of the artwork in modernity with further bibliographical references, see Jan Urbich, *Literarische Ästhetik*. Köln, Wien, Weimar: Böhlau 2011, pp. 67-113, 202-217, and Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 273-294, 320-350, 454-477.

[207](#) On this performative, temporal existence of aesthetic meaning see Jan Urbich, “Jedes Gedicht hat sein Datum” in Klaus Fiebig, *Man ist immer beliebig. Gedichte*. Ed. by Werner Seltier. Hannover: Verlag der blaue reiter 2014, pp. 89-115, here pp. 92-97.



[208](#) See Urbich, “Das Ausdruckslose. Zur Dialektik des Scheins bei Benjamin”.

[209](#) See in more detail on the dialectical negativity of this inner structure of Darstellung Urbich, Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin, pp. 147-204.

[210](#) Here, Benjamin differs, again analogous to Hegel, from Kant, whose concept of concepts is bound to the primary source of the judgemental sentence resp. the subjekt-predicate-proposition: Concepts are functions of propositions. Similar to Kant, Benjamin understands concepts as “acts of [...] thinking” (“Handlungen des [...] Denkens”, Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, p. 196 [B 81]) and thereby as transcendental or empirical executions of reason that only show their productivity by the performance they deliver. Different to Kant, Benjamin as well as Hegel do not understand concepts from the exclusive function within propositional sentences. Because for Kant, although concepts are elements of propositions and therefore seem to be more basal resp. elementary than the more complex, derivate sentences in which they are used, concepts gain their functions and meaning only by the propositional context from which they are derived: so that the logic of judgements is primary and fundamental to the understanding of what concepts do. See Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, pp. 204-206 (B 92-94). Benjamin in contrast criticises, as we have seen analogous to Hegel, the the orientation on the structure of propositions and the implications from this orientation for epistemology; and one consequence is that he releases the differential functions of concepts from the exclusive fixation on judgements and expands the view on non-propositional, yet conceptual functions of Darstellung, as he has learned in the philosophies of Plato and Hölderlin.

[211](#) Adorno recognised how close this comes to Hegel's idea of systematic dialectical truth. In adopting Benjamin's use of the term "constellation" and giving it as the role of an epistemological foundation of logic, he at the same time emphasises the Hegelian origins of this kind of thinking. See Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 161-165; Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, pp. 163-168.

[212](#) Hegel, The Encyclopaedia Logic, p. 128 (§ 81); Hegel, Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I, p. 172f.

[213](#) Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, p. 346. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik II*, p. 25.

[214](#) Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p. 181 (§ 116). Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I*, p. 239. On Hegel's theory of absolute negativity, see Henrich, "Hegels Logik der Reflexion. Neue Fassung", and Iber, *Metaphysik absoluter Relationalität*, pp. 219-239.

[215](#) I have shown this in detail in Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 176-204. On more aspects of negativity in Benjamin's philosophical idea of *Darstellung* and truth, especially on the "expressionless" ("Ausdruckslose") and Benjamin's theory of "interruption" ("Unterbrechung"), see Urbich, "Das Ausdruckslose. Zur Dialektik des Scheins bei Benjamin".



[216](#) Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, p. 261 (XIV.). GS I.2, 701.

[217](#) Analogous to this, the truthful artwork does not defeat and abolish the “chaos” of existence, but only for a moment “enchants” this chaos by “form”; see GS I.1, 180f.

[218](#) In Hegel's theory of "Shine" ("Schein", Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, pp. 341-354; Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik II*, pp. 19-24), the non-integrable "rest" against the essence that the Shine represents proves to be actually the otherness (illusion) against the essence (truth) within the essence —whereas for Benjamin, the exteriority that belongs to truth in *Darstellung* can not be obtained and integrated in the truthful rationality of *Darstellung* however and remains to be its necessary "hole" resp. "crack". On Benjamin's use of Hegel's idea of "Shine", see Urbich, "Das Ausdruckslose. Zur Dialektik des Scheins bei Benjamin". On Hegel's concept of "Shine", see extensively Iber, *Metaphysik absoluter Relationalität*, pp. 68-120.

[219](#) See on the term “absolute exteriority” and its explanatory power for Benjamin Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 59-68. Hence, Benjamin’s idea of truth-bearing “approachableness” of being in *Darstellung* keeps a captive relation to a refugium of unapproachableness that is expressed f.e. in the theory of the “expressionless” (“Ausdruckslose”) —as well as to certain romantic concepts of absolute subjectivity and its indissoluble dimension of partial intransparency (see Urbich, *Darstellung bei Walter Benjamin*, pp. 64-67).

[220](#) See on this, and also on Adorno's closeness to Heidegger in this respect, Jan Urbich, "Kritische Theorie" in *Handbuch Literatur und Philosophie*. Ed. by Hans Feger. Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler 2014, pp. 192-216, here p. 210.

[221](#) Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, p. 264 (XVIII.B). GS I.2, 704.

[222](#) Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, p. 257 (VIII). GS I.2, 697.

[223](#) Benjamin, “Goethes Elective Affinities”, p. 356. GS I.1, 201.



[224](#) See Tetens, *Gott denken*, pp. 16-21.

[225](#) Rainer Maria Rilke, Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus. Trans. By A. Poulin, Jr. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 1977, p. 59 [V. 68f.]. Rainer Maria Rilke, Duineser Elegien. 8. Elegie, V. 68f.: “Uns überfüllts. Wir ordnens. Es zerfällt./ Wir ordnens wieder und zerfallen selbst.”